



Tôwa

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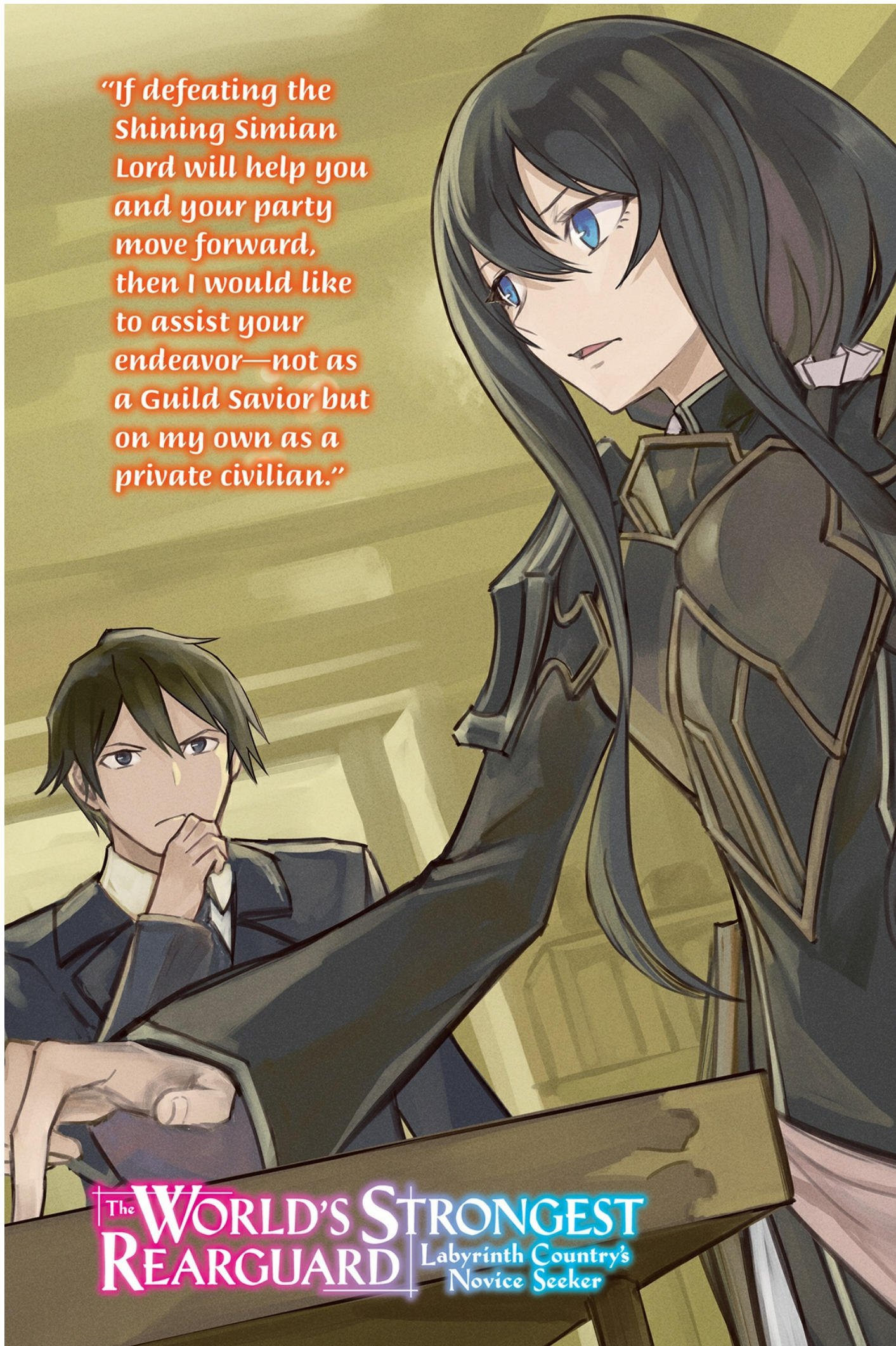
Huuka Kazabana

7

The **WORLD'S STRONGEST**
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker



"If defeating the
shining Simian
Lord will help you
and your party
move forward,
then I would like
to assist your
endeavor—not as
a Guild Savior but
on my own as a
private civilian."



The **WORLD'S STRONGEST**
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker



I drew my
slingshot
as fast as
I could
and fired.
“Freeze!”

Only a split second separated my
attack and our enemy's—and
cemented the winner of this battle.
“Begone, ghost...!”



The instant
Murakumo
called out
to Elitia, a
second blade
materialized
in the
swordswoman's
left hand.

"Scatter your
brilliance in
step with my
sworded dance,
O blade of
flowers!"

Tôwa
Illustration by
Huuka Kazabana

YEN
ON
New York



The **WORLD'S STRONGEST** **7**
REARGUARD | Labyrinth Country's
Novice Seeker

Copyright



Tôwa

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Translation by Alexandra McCullough-Garcia Cover art by Huuka Kazabana

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TANSAKUSHA-Volume 7

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PROLOGUE

Escape from the Blazing Mansion and Thawing Snow

Just as we found ourselves poised to move up from District Seven, an opportunity to advance even farther, and quicker, fell into our laps. Third-Class Dragon Captain Kozelka requested we assist with responding to a stampede in District Five, giving us the chance to temporarily skip District Six entirely. With Guild Savior Seraphina officially joining our party, we rose to the challenge with more battle strength than ever before. Nonetheless, immediately upon arriving in District Five, we found the expected stampede well underway—and learned firsthand by fighting the swarms of Death Stalkers and The Calamity, the Named Monster leading them, that the monsters in this district were far and above more formidable foes than those in District Seven.

And yet we managed to overcome the perilous situation. Working together with Kozelka and Khosrow as well as Yunata, a District Five Guild Savior, we activated a powerful weapon embedded in the city itself and successfully vanquished The Calamity. Our efforts earned us the designation of Most Distinguished Seekers, an honor that also gave us leave to remain longer in District Five. Our stay secured, we resolved to ask our artisan friends we'd met along the way to join us; they'd agreed to exclusively support our party.

We were making real progress—at least, that's what I'd thought. However, I failed to recognize how seeing our party members wounded in the vicious battle had affected Elitia. Afraid to risk injury to anyone else, she elected to rescue her friend Rury from the clutches of the Shining Simian Lord on her own, even if it meant abandoning everything we'd been through together. I understood just as well as my other party members the mental anguish that drove Elitia to choose that path; none of us meant to blame her for her actions—in fact, it only hardened our conviction to save her at all costs. Rather than waiting and praying for her safe return, we went to her. We knew it might pit us against the Shining Simian Lord in an extremely dangerous battle, but we

considered no other alternative.

And so we delved into the labyrinth where the Shining Simian Lord lurked: the Blazing Red Mansion. After racing through the ever-crimson foliage of the forests in the first level, we had Adeline—Seraphina’s subordinate who had accompanied us—activate her Arrow Familiar skill to survey the area and locate Elitia. No sooner had we reached our friend already engaged in battle against the Simian Lord than we realized why it had never yet been defeated: The vicious Named Monster had the power to subjugate innocent seekers into its minions. Unable to bring ourselves to fight the evil primate’s brainwashed captives, we had no choice but to retreat.

Alphecca hurried us out of the Simian Lord’s clutches, only to be caught by the monster’s chains. But unbeknownst to us, Theresia had surreptitiously slunk behind the Simian Lord for a sneak attack, giving us the chance to escape. However, she did not get out of the ploy unharmed. The devious ape branded her with the mark of its curse—a heinous hex that forced Seekers to obey its every command.

We had two important goals to accomplish in the short time we could remain in District Five: rescue Rury from the Simian Lord’s control, and defeat the Named Monster once and for all, releasing Theresia from its evil spell.



As we left the second floor of the Blazing Red Mansion and returned to the first, we passed through vermillion gates that reminded me of Shinto torii. I was struck with the familiar sensation of being teleported, and the scenery around us changed. The dense forest of crimson trees grew so thick, we couldn’t even see past its canopy. Though the bright red leaves continuously fluttered to the ground, they didn’t appear to be piling up—an effect I attributed to be this labyrinth’s unique environment.

“...Ellie...,” Igarashi called, but received no response.

The two sat in the back of the chariot; Elitia, her eyes blank and empty, lay listless in Igarashi’s arms. Elitia’s dear friend, though captive to the Simian Lord, was still alive. It was an encouraging discovery, to be sure, yet far from the happy reunion she’d hoped for.

“What we saw back there must be one main reason no one has defeated the Simian Lord all this time. Advanced Seekers would almost certainly have what it takes to slay it, but when the monster deploys its captive Seekers as its shield, then...”

Anyone who took on the Simian Lord would first have to fight not monsters but fellow human Seekers, captives who turned all their hostility and their most devastating techniques toward challengers, collaborating among themselves in a twisted sort of party. Seraphina and Adeline’s sullen grimaces confirmed that even the Guild Savors had their hands tied.

We had already confronted monsters that could manipulate their enemies: Both the Vine Puppeteer and Silvanus the Enchanter’s Messenger possessed similar skills. Armor or equipment could be modified to protect us from ailments like Charmed, but I knew practically nothing about the Simian Lord’s brand of enslaving techniques. It occurred to me that if the masks the monster’s hostages wore held some special significance, perhaps breaking those could snap them out of the spell. But I couldn’t guarantee that would work.

These simian masks appeared different from those donned by demi-humans. If we could only get our hands on one, we might possibly discover how they truly worked—but the idea would be moot if they weren’t something you could safely remove from their wearers.

Maybe there are others like Elitia trying to rescue these imprisoned Seekers. If so, they might have more intel on the Simian Lord... Still, even assuming such people do exist, are we gonna be able to find them in the few days we have left here...?

This marked the first day, meaning we had six more in District Five. We could technically request an extension, but given that we’d already broken precedent with our District Skip, I found it hard to imagine we’d convince anyone to bend the rules even further for us.

“Atobe, I know you’re still processing all this yourself, but could you tell us what you’re thinking?” Igarashi prodded. “We could all use a little hope...”

The severity of our situation had evidently dampened her spirits. She had a point; ruminating on all our troubles alone would only make the group more

anxious.

“Of course, once we get home,” I told her. “But for now, I need more time to get my thoughts in order.”

Seraphina, Igarashi, and Theresia nodded.

Though by all rights she should’ve been the most distressed of us all, Theresia displayed incredible fortitude that at once comforted me and made me painfully aware of my own cowardice. The Etch-a-Hex the Simian Lord had used on her had already begun to gradually overwrite the demi-human Slave Seal on the nape of her neck. At this point, the edges had barely started to smudge, but it must’ve been a painful process; a fever continuously burned through Theresia’s body.

“We didn’t find any other primate monsters on the second floor aside from the Simian Lord and its one companion. Granted, we can’t be sure it isn’t keeping any other regular Named Monsters. Is it safe to assume that as long as these monsters don’t explode in number, we won’t see a stampede?” I asked.

“That is our working theory,” replied Seraphina. “I’m afraid I’m not very familiar with this labyrinth, but monsters that operate in organized groups do sometimes try to trick Seekers. Some set traps or establish strongholds to try to fend off their own demise as long as possible, and a subsection within that class also builds fortresses which significantly increase the difficulty of overtaking them.”

If the Simian Lord and its minions had, in fact, constructed that fortress, it meant they must wield some degree of masonry. How had they learned it? Or did they come by it instinctively? Either way, it was safe to say a monster that intelligent would inevitably devise schemes to protect itself. And for the Simian Lord, its ability to enslave Seekers played a crucial role in those strategies.

“...Why do you think it chose the second floor?” Igarashi wondered. “If there are other monsters on the third floor, is there a chance they’ll cause a stampede?”

Her question made me realize for the first time that both of the stampedes we’d seen so far had been led by a Named Monster and the normal versions of that species. Both Death from Above and The Calamity rapidly proliferated,

making them challenging to defeat.

“Let’s get our hands on as much information on the Blazing Red Mansion as we can. Maybe we’ll find some answers,” I suggested.

“District Five has an archive, one you should be permitted to peruse with your All-Star Seeker designation,” explained Seraphina.

I’d heard of these archives located in odd-numbered districts before but hadn’t had the time to check any out. Hopefully, this one would provide useful information—though if tomes with details about the Simian Lord’s skills that enslaved seekers were readily available, the monster probably wouldn’t have gained such infamy as an impossibly formidable foe.

“...I’m sorry... I—I knew I couldn’t do anything, but I...left on my own...,” Elitia choked out.

“Elitia...,” I murmured as tears once again streamed down her cheeks.

What was I supposed to say in situations like this? Something along the lines of *“As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters”* wouldn’t give her even a moment’s comfort.

“You must’ve had a reason for going off on your own, right, Ellie?” Igarashi offered gently.

“...I saw...these awful guys... They wanted to kill Rury...to steal her equipment...but the Simian Lord got them, too...!”

“That’s despicable...,” I spit in disgust. “Wouldn’t stealing armor like that raise their karma?”

Seraphina lowered her eyes and shook her head—clearly, the people under the evil ape’s control didn’t count as normal Seekers. “...My license registered them as monsters. I imagine the system judged the binds which behold them to the Simian Lord as status ailments that will not naturally come undone.”

Once faced with the harsh reality, even the people who tried to rescue the enslaved Seekers could easily lose the will to fight. And so the Blazing Red Mansion remained untouched. Leaving it undisturbed wouldn’t put the district in any danger, and few deemed it worthwhile to defeat the Simian Lord at the

cost of human life.

“Well, we’re going to have to find a way to lift those theoretically incurable status ailments. If slaying the Simian Lord can break the curse, we’ll have to find a way to take only it and its monster minions down,” I declared. Even so, I couldn’t yet see any rays of hope illuminating how we’d manage to throw ourselves at an enemy exponentially stronger than us, satisfy very trying conditions, and win—without losing anyone.

“.....”

Still as a stone in my arms, Theresia had listened to the discussion quietly, but now she turned her head toward me as if to check how I was doing. I couldn’t explain her injuries away with the excuse that I hadn’t seen her action coming. It was only because she’d snuck up on the Simian Lord that we’d all managed to escape from its fortress. We’d only gotten this far because every single member of our party worked together. That’s why I’d hoped to face the Simian Lord once we’d all earned the proper qualifications to do so, not on a frantic race to retrieve Elitia after she delved into the labyrinth on her own.

“Ms. Elitia,” Seraphina began, “I understand you previously came to District Five as a member of the White Night Brigade, and this affiliation granted you official permission to enter five-star labyrinths. However, you kept this secret from your party and decided to take individual action. The story you’ve just shared with us has sufficiently explained your motives in doing so. Nevertheless, your actions were exceedingly reckless. Could you not have placed more faith in your party with whom you have overcome all manner of trials...?”

“...I...I didn’t want to see anyone else get hurt... I...couldn’t bear to lose someone again...for something so selfish...”

Elitia always stood on the very front lines for us, bravely battling any monsters we came across. Occasionally, it seemed she scraped away years of her life to take on enormous monsters many times her size, and all to save us—to make sure she never lost anyone again. And yet I’d gotten the feeling she thought we were leagues and leagues behind her. Even so, I hadn’t wanted to pry too far into her private concerns, completely convinced that was for the best. Deep

self-disgust now roiled within me for ever believing such drivel.

“...I’m a Death Sword,” Elitia began. “...I shouldn’t even be around people anymore. Deep down, I know you’re all actually terrified of me...”

I’d thought I’d understood. The Blue Butterfly had conjured illusions of the last things I wanted to see. It had also shown similar nightmares to Elitia, unearthing her primal fears. Then, during our battle against The Calamity, there was only one conclusion Elitia could take away when she saw our party member injured before her eyes. I knew all along. But playing the role of the understanding authority figure, I let Elitia walk off alone.

“...Listen to me, Elitia.”

“...!”

Be the adult, make sure you keep the balance, and no one will hate you. I’d firmly planted myself in that stance this whole time, only for it to bring us to the foothills of an impenetrable impasse. And yet it was by no means too late. From the moment I met Elitia, I’d never once felt the urge to give up on her. And that was exactly why I had to get it all out in the open, even if I hurt her, or myself, in the process.

“If you’ve really thought this whole time we were holding on to some secret fear of you, then all the trust we’ve built in each other was purely superficial—and it’s my fault for letting that doubt fester. I didn’t want to press you to say anything you didn’t want to share, and I thought it’d be okay if you opened up to us one day. But that day came and went, and still I tried to convince myself nothing had changed.”

“Arihito...,” she whispered.

“Atobe...”

For a second, Igarashi seemed to waver over whether to stop me. I’d tried to keep up my “good employee” and “good subordinate” roles in front of her, too. Even now, I couldn’t say with any conviction whether we’d work best as a team if things stayed that way. Every organization depends on people who hold their true thoughts to themselves in favor of keeping the peace. And yet even with my friends’ lives on the line, I still chose to be the “good person”—like a

complete idiot.

“Elitia...I’d like you to tell me everything you’ve been through with that sword of yours. You can tell all of us, if you prefer. I’ll leave that up to you.”

“...Mr. Atobe, perhaps Ms. Elitia is not in the best condition for such a request...,” Seraphina softly objected.

“Every single person in my party is important to me, regardless of when they joined. That goes for you, too, Seraphina. I never want you to get hurt, and if you’re worried about something, I’ll do everything in my power to try to find a solution,” I replied. “But Elitia hasn’t been entirely truthful with us, and to me it feels as if that omission has kept her a step removed from the group. If we don’t deal with this now, one day it’ll drive us to a dead end.”

Everyone erects protective walls around their heart. They keep others at a distance, setting boundaries they don’t want anyone to cross. But sometimes, those walls also prevent them from getting close to anyone else. No matter how much it may have appeared Elitia had opened up to Suzuna, Misaki, and the others, her outward smiles had no heart to them.

“...My job is one I can’t do alone. That fact took me to the Mercenary Office, where I met Theresa, and for the first time, I thought I might be able to make it as a Seeker. But Theresa, Igarashi, and I would never have made it this far with just the three of us. I can’t tell you how touched I was when your countless attacks and my skills came together for the first time. I couldn’t even believe it was possible. And when Suzuna and Misaki joined us, I felt like together we could reach any heights.”

Though Elitia’s eyes remained hollow, I believed my words were getting through to her, and I pressed on.

“No matter how powerful our enemies may be, there will always be a way to defeat them. But we need every last one of us to pull it off. I can’t count the number of times you’ve saved us, Elitia, but I’ll remind you again and again until it feels real to you. Theresa *wanted* to help you; that’s why she threw herself into that awful danger, doing what I could never have done... And it wasn’t logic that moved her; it was her desire to save you. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“...I don’t know what I’ll do...if that ape...gets Theresa, too...”

“I won’t ever let that happen—never. But to make sure of that, we all need to get stronger. Though I’m now painfully aware of how quickly we rushed through to this point, it’s better to realize late than never.”

Anxious concern for Rury and the unimaginable treatment she might be facing had tortured Elitia’s mind this whole time, through every single battle we’d fought. And while worries about whether a Seeker could even survive imprisonment plagued her more than anyone else, she also believed more fervently than anyone that her friend still held on—just like I believed I would one day make Theresia human again.

“...Rury’s alive, Elitia,” I told her softly. “You wouldn’t have gotten to see that if you hadn’t been brave enough to act.”

“...Ah...” Her eyes wavered with emotion.

“So let’s run this race together, till the very end. I’m going to make sure you never leave us behind again before we save her—or after. You can’t get away from us anymore, Elitia.”

“...!” Light returned to Elitia’s eyes, and tears spilled down her cheeks once more. She covered her face, mussed her hair, and started bawling. “...Uwaaaaaaah...!”

Igarashi drew the sobbing girl into an even tighter embrace. For now, at least—but no, I hadn’t earned that right yet.

“.....”

“...Theresia?”

Theresia lifted herself into a seated position. I thought she wanted to get down from Alphecca at first, but I was wrong. She placed her hand on the top of my head and petted it—then gently traced the moisture that ran down my cheeks.

“.....”

Her mouth moved but made no sound. Then, surprisingly, she brought the finger with which she’d wiped away my tears to her lips, though I couldn’t begin to imagine why. Swallowing the embarrassment and every other emotion that

stirred within me, I simply rested my hand on Theresia's mask, then fell silent.

CHAPTER 1

New Meetings and Reunions

Part I: Team Battle Reprise

Just before we dove into the Blazing Red Mansion, I went to Kozelka and Khosrow for advice. Kozelka was the one who'd asked our party to assist in District Five since we'd earned the Advanced Seekers title. I trusted their judgment and wanted to ask them for their input before making an important decision. Though the night had grown late by the time they finished patrolling the district after the stampede, they readily agreed to meet with us. That was why when we'd stepped out of the Blazing Red Mansion, we saw the two of them waiting for us. A look of relief washed over both their faces as soon as we came into view.

"I am exceedingly glad to see you found Ms. Elitia unharmed, as had been reported to me," Kozelka said by way of greeting.

"Thank you, me too. But after that experience, I'm more certain than ever that we'll need to prepare as thoroughly as possible before we attempt anything more in this labyrinth."

Khosrow listened to me intently, his arms crossed and his expression more severely grim than I'd ever seen it before. "Y'all have proved you've got what it takes to face off against a District Five level-twelve Named Monster. Atobe, your party is clearly strong enough to survive the challenges here, but the Simian Lord has lived a very long time. It's beyond dangerous... It's cunning, you know. But the nastiest bit about it is the way it commands its minions in a quasi-organized way."

Khosrow must know a lot about the Blazing Red Mansion and the Simian Lord, I thought. But the moment he saw that gleam of hope in my eyes, his lips curved into a pained grin and he shook his head. "I hate to break it to you, but I just learned all this after coming here. I've got old friends in the district, see."

"Yes, Commander Dylan mentioned you were acquainted when he presented us the Magistite Medallion...", I recalled.

“That’s exactly right. I was his instructor back in the day when he was young,” he started, then immediately interrupted his own story to add, “Ah, but I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, I’m not *that* old, my shabby appearance to the contrary...”

Khosrow did have a pretty scraggly beard, but I could tell his whole look would change if he shaved it. Even so, it was hard to imagine he was younger than me—and I was pushing thirty. We might’ve been about the same age, actually.

“Both Commander Dylan and I studied under Khosrow as his apprentices,” Kozelka told me.

“Well, let’s just say we had a long and winding road to where we stand now. Atobe, the two of us’ll stay here as long as y’all do. There anything we can help you with?” the former instructor asked.

“N-no, I couldn’t possibly trouble Guild Savors with our party’s personal issues...”

“When you’ve got something that needs doing and time’s against you, you take all the help you can get, wherever you can get it. Plus, it’s not like we’re constantly waiting for orders on our days off. You could say we’re not Seekers, and generally speaking you’d be right, but we’re all basically the same deep down. I can’t help but want to lend a hand to anyone who delves into a labyrinth for a noble purpose... No, the truth is, I want to pay you back the huge favor I owe you,” Khosrow explained, revealing the gratitude he felt for our help in quelling the stampede. Kozelka nodded quietly in agreement, then said, “I believe you grasped how Khosrow and I approach battle after watching us in action. The same engagement gave us similar insight into your skills and leadership, and it underlined how incredibly advanced you and your party are in comparison with your peers.”

“And that’s exactly why we don’t expect anythin’ to stop you from going forward. We Guild Savors and all Labyrinth Country citizens always hang our hopes on strong Seekers, and if we can help you forward in some way, well, I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“...Kozelka, Khosrow...”

The two Guild Savors, exponentially stronger than us and much longer residents in this country, felt like distant heroes I'd hoped to one day reach. And yet, those same two were actually extending their hands out to us.

"More than anything, I just wanna fight by your side again, Atobe," Khosrow confessed. "Let's give this wannabe slave driver a shock it'll never forget."

"Monsters simply act on instinct," Kozelka added. "However, some do show definite hostility toward Seekers... If defeating the Shining Simian Lord will help you and your party move forward, then I would like to assist your endeavor—not as a Guild Savior but on my own as a private civilian."

"...R-right, but you wouldn't *actually* be on your own, would you, little lady? You'd have me with yo—whoa!" Khosrow began to protest, seemingly unsettled by the phrase *on your own*. But quicker than my eyes could follow, Kozelka sliced her open hand through the air directly at Khosrow's neck, stopping mere inches away.

"...May I remind you, Khosrow—you are the one who warned that overly familiar banter can cloud one's judgment," she growled. "It's past time you realize engaging in such disrespectful talk leaves you open to attack."

"I—I ensure you it will never happen again...," he whimpered.

Kozelka withdrew her hand, but Khosrow remained frozen to the spot. The unmitigated displeasure in Kozelka's voice made it very clear that though she may have once been Khosrow's student, the tables had unquestionably turned.

"...Do me a favor and forget everything I just said," he told me. "If you'd kindly take over from here, Third-Class Dragon Captain Kozelka."

"We shall now resume our regular duties as part of the Guild Savors' raid unit, though we will retain the ability to move at will until we return to District Seven. Please do call on us should you need our assistance," Kozelka urged. "I'll assemble personnel who can take part in your operation in the event your second raid on the Blazing Red Mansion requires multiple parties."

"...I—I can't thank you enough," I stammered. "Honestly, I was worried the situation called for more than our party alone could muster... I didn't even know where to start looking for other parties in this district who could come to our

aid.”

“Fair enough. People end up being real cautious by the time they make it here,” said Khosrow. “It’s no walk in the park gettin’ someone to go along with another party’s mission, either... That said, I’d bet good coin you could work out a joint battle formation if you find people with the same goals in mind.”

There was no guarantee we’d find the Shining Simian Lord in the same fortress the next time we went back. At least one Named Monster answered to its commands, but we couldn’t rule out the possibility there were more. We’d have to isolate the Simian Lord and its Demon Monkey Guard, as well as the enslaved Seekers, as much as possible; otherwise, their combined forces could overpower us and make any attempt to free the manipulated captives that much more difficult.

I’d use the map Agnes from the White Night Brigade gave me to plan our strategy. We could do a recon check on the fortress first if necessary, then go in with several parties to divide and conquer.

Now that I think about it, this is starting to feel less like a battle against a monster and more like a castle invasion.

“Before anything else, I’m going to look into what means there may be to free the Seekers under the Simian Lord’s control, or at least get around them without a fight,” I told the two Guild Saviors.

“Quite logical... I have no desire to see any Seekers perish.”

“Just don’t forget they won’t exactly return the favor. You can order your parties to spare the captive Seekers all you like, but pretty thoughts like that’ll fly out the window the moment things get dicey...,” warned Khosrow. “You’d better prepare as many tricks to sideline or neutralize them as you can.”

“Of course. I have a few already, but I’ll use all the time we have to see if we can’t find any more efficient methods.”

For the moment, we’d covered everything I’d hoped to discuss. We still had a few days, too, so I could always meet up with them to talk if necessary. We said our good-byes and watched as Kozelka and Khosrow walked away. Then Seraphina turned to me and said, “Mr. Atobe, I’m pleased to see how much

faith they've placed in you. However, I'm afraid Adeline may not be able to join the battle due to her lower level..."

"I wanted to ask if she could help prepare for the fight, not actually participate in the battle, so I'd appreciate it if she could just accompany us to the second floor again."

"Understood. We shall also remain in the district for the foreseeable future, so please do reach out if our participation might assist you on an expedition."

Adeline's skill Arrow Familiar could give us a bird's-eye view of the fortress without having to risk getting close. Any drastic change in the layout could prove fatal, so I wanted to make sure we did a final check the day before the operation.

"....."

"Hm? Who are they...?"

Theresia tugged at my sleeve; only then did I notice the two people watching us from a distance. One, apparently in her late teens, donned what could only be described as quintessential proper young lady garb and a large, wide-brimmed hat that hid her ears. She held a white umbrella in one hand, though I saw no signs it had rained while we were in the labyrinth. The other, perhaps slightly older young woman stood next to the teenage young lady, dressed in a maid uniform. After exchanging a meaningful glance with her younger companion, the two gracefully approached us.

"...Might I steal a moment of your time, good sir?" the young lady in the hat asked.

"Yes... How may I help you?" I responded, momentarily startled by how perfectly her speech had matched my impression of the well-bred belle, though I tried my best not to let it show. Elitia's mannerisms sometimes emanated a rather refined aura, but this young woman commanded a different kind of dignity, one that extended even to subtle facial expressions.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Ivril, and this is Viola..." She introduced herself and her companion. "We are employed as Seekers in a party unto our own."

To think the two of them could take on any of the labyrinths in District Five on their own—they must've each mastered considerable strength. The woman called Viola remained at her post behind Ivril, still as stone. The long bangs that hid her eyes from view gave me the impression she probably didn't fuss too much over her hair, though I could still tell she was watching us closely.

"I'm Arihito Atobe, and these ladies are my party members."

After we'd both given our names, Ivril removed her cloth gloves, gave them to Viola, then offered me her right hand—which I met in a handshake. A cherubic, almost imperceptible smile graced her lips.

"Thank you kindly, good sir. More than once have I had my hand refused or been accused of malicious intent."

"Well...we're all a little different, and I'm not one to judge the beliefs others hold."

"...You have quite the respect for individual diversity, haven't you, Mr. Atobe? I strive to be the same."

Shaking her hand exposed me to the risk she'd activate a skill on me—a lesson I'd learned the hard way through my experience with Shirone. At the same time, logical as it might have been to constantly keep my guard up, I also didn't want to suspect everyone around me of ill will.

"Under different circumstances, I should have liked to prepare a small gift before calling out to you...", Ivril confessed apologetically. "However, we had not expected to chance upon you here."

"Do you mean...you saw us leave the labyrinth?"

"To be perfectly honest, we caught sight of you entering it," she admitted. "I heard you explain to the two Guild Savors that your friend had gone in alone, and that you planned to ask temporary leave to follow her..."

The way things stood, Elitia was the only one of us who had the official clearance to enter the Blazing Red Mansion, a five-star labyrinth. Even the temporary pass we'd received required us to leave immediately upon retrieving her. If we wanted to go back, we'd have to first all earn the proper qualification.

Ivril turned her gaze to Elitia, who'd regained her footing. Igarashi and Seraphina stood supportively at her sides, but even so, Ivril seemed to perceive the slightly languid air that still lingered over our friend.

Part II: Permission to Enter

“...I beg your pardon for speaking so frankly, but this young lady, the Death Sword...she aims to rescue a friend held captive in that labyrinth, does she not?”

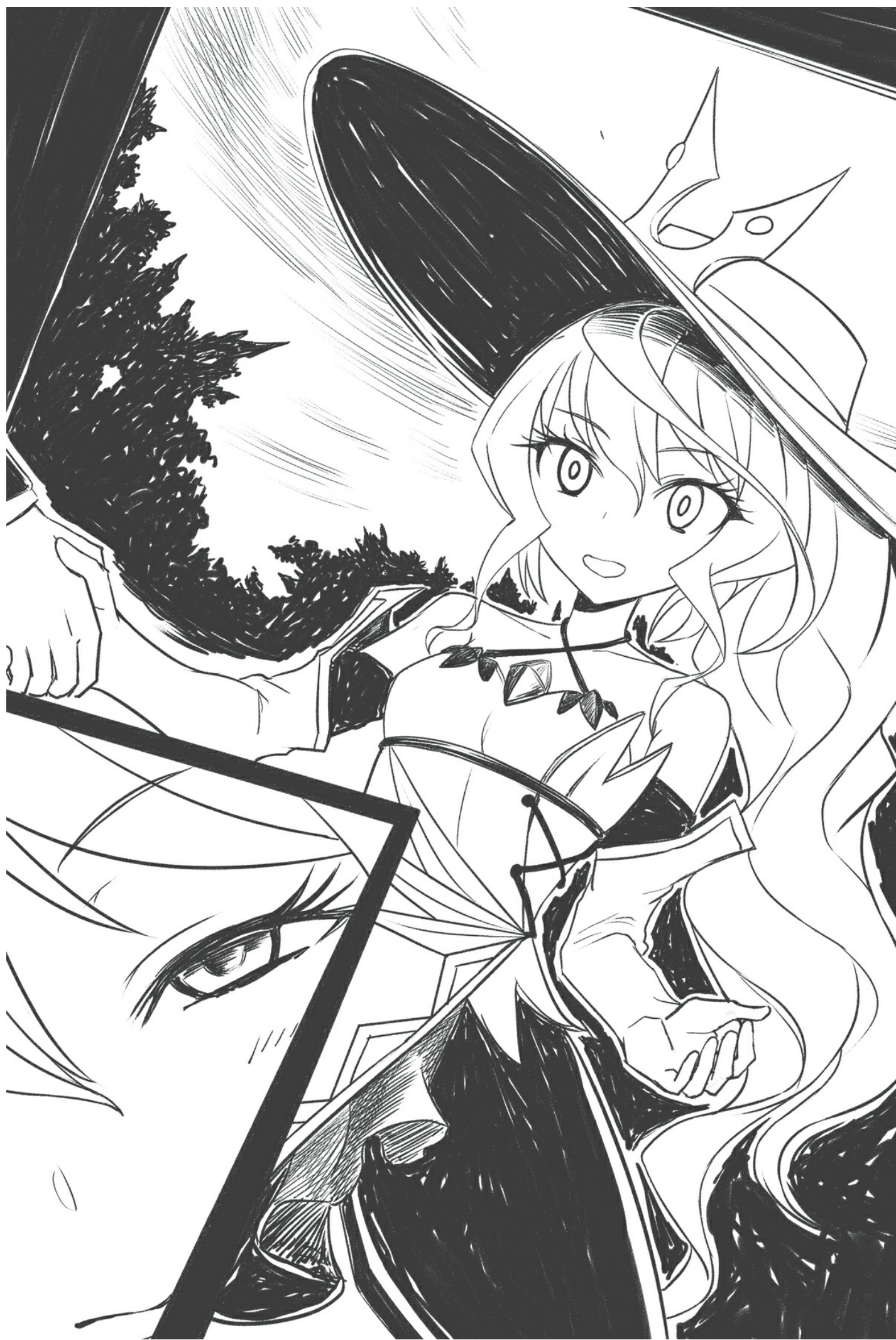
“You’ve heard of Elitia?”

“Indeed. We are staunchly opposed to leaving this labyrinth in its current state. It may not produce stampedes, but more than a decade has passed since it was left to its own devices...,” Ivril explained. “After some investigation, I learned several Seekers had entered its depths, never to be seen again. It appears ever since the fifth year of these disappearances, traffic in and out of the labyrinth dramatically plummeted.”

We’re not the only ones—there are other parties who think something needs to be done about that place.

“...Allow me to clarify something. People call Elitia the Death Sword, but she by no means asked for that name. She’s come to our rescue time and time again. If anything, she’s the antithesis of the Death Sword, a staunch defender and true friend.”

“Yes, I understand...” She paused. “At least I thought I did. And yet I should never have addressed her with such a fearful moniker. I am terribly sorry for the affront on her honor.”



“...It’s...it’s fine...,” Elitia stammered. “I’ve been called worse...”

“It is absolutely not fine,” Ivril protested. “If you did not elect that name for yourself, then we must do all we can to correct the misunderstanding, or you’ll forever be tied to a title that does not accurately describe your person.”

Surprise flashed across Elitia’s face, but failing to find the words to reply, she simply hung her head.

“Raise your chin with pride, Elitia Centrale. The mission you have sworn to fulfill is the very essence of justice. If you do not believe the veracity of its righteousness yourself, then you shall forever be at the mercy of that sword you bear.”

“Ivril, that’s a little...,” Igarashi interjected out of concern for our inconsolable friend, but Ivril’s eyes remained fixed on Elitia.

“...So you know about the sword, too,” I said.

“Yes. Forgive me, I know I am touching on yet another sensitive subject...but I simply had to say my piece now. This young lady ventured into the labyrinth because she believed she could escape it on her own.” Then, addressing Elitia, she asked, “And yet what happened? If Mr. Arihito and your companions had not gone to your aid, you—”

“I want to become stronger.” Elitia spoke up, her voice trembling, just as I was about to cut Ivril off from saying any more. “I need to be stronger... I never want to go through that again...”

“...So you seek strength to alleviate those fears?” Ivril pressed.

“...And what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with fighting for the precious people I met in this country, with wanting to get stronger...?!” she demanded. Ivril faced her straight on, as if unflinchingly accepting all the emotion Elitia turned toward her.

Just then a single tear streaked down Ivril’s cheek.

“And yet the very fact you willingly chose a course of action that would inevitably end in your own demise is proof enough of the hold that blade has on your heart,” she said softly. “Weapons only shine with life when their masters

strive to survive. Above all else, you must never lose your will to live.”

Elitia had resigned herself to any fate as long as she could save Rury. In other words, her desire to atone for her failures outweighed any hopes she had of a future with us—just as I had felt from the very beginning.

“...Milady,” Viola prodded.

“Oh, very well... I know I am in no position to preach to anyone,” she admitted. “But I do believe you will become stronger, Elitia. And when that time comes, you will find yourself called by a new name...one that truly suits you.”

“...Ivril, who exactly are...?” I started to ask, but she simply pressed her finger to her lips and smiled.

“I must confess, I also overheard your discussions on assembling parties to assist in your operation. If it is no imposition, would you consider letting Viola and myself join you as well? I’m confident our skills will prove useful in District Five labyrinths, and we will surely not impede your progress.”

“...Seriously?” I spluttered. “But we just—”

“Met, yes, indeed. But I’ve learned all I need to know about you in this brief time. Not once did you look at Elitia with self-interest or pity in mind; your eyes shone with sincerity. And you accepted my handshake...for which I am exceedingly grateful.”

I just hadn’t wanted to seem paranoid of every new person I met—and actually felt some shame in being so weak. Even after this discussion, I wasn’t sure I could completely trust her. What if the two unexpectedly deviated from the plan during the actual raid on the Simian Lord?

Still, she’d urged Elitia to treasure her own life. If I started doubting the sincerity of such encouragement, I’d soon lose all confidence in myself as well.

“...This mission will be full of danger. Are you sure you still want to help?”

“Quite. I cannot, of course, reveal all my skills to you, but I shall faithfully dispatch any role you assign me and will explain the techniques I shall utilize to do so. If what you seek are means to prevent the captive Seekers from attacking, to render them harmless without injury...then Viola and I can provide

both, though we will be more successful with a larger party.”

If that’s true, then why is it just you two in your party? I wanted to ask, but thought better of touching on something so personal with someone I’d just met.

“We’d best be going... I am so pleased to have met you here, Mr. Atobe. Allow me to share my license details so you can contact us at a later date.”

“I appreciate it...,” I said. “Please be careful on your way back. It’s gotten quite dark.”

“Thank you, but I have a formidable guard with me. You need not worry.” Ivril bowed politely then left the plaza. Viola followed but not before first bowing to us as well.

“Well, she certainly was a very...refined young lady, wasn’t she...? Do you think they might have a ‘Southern Belle’ occupation here?” wondered Igarashi.

“Whatever she does, I’m sure it’s a rare position. I can’t even begin to imagine her fighting style...”

Even if she wasn’t a reincarnate, she didn’t seem to be of the jade race like Ceres—definitely a mysterious character, but we could use all the help we could get from Seekers who could hold their own in a District Five labyrinth.

Ideally, I’d like to have at least three parties on this mission to invade the Simian Lord’s fortress, but we still didn’t have enough people for that. We might not end up with enough to fully fill three eight-person parties, either. But the most important points we needed to focus on were isolating our enemies and going at the Simian Lord with as much firepower as we could muster.

“I’ll bet she uses that umbrella as a weapon.”

“Elitia...”

I’d been worried that Ivril’s tough love had gotten Elitia’s emotions running high—Elitia spotted the concern in my gaze and flushed red.

“Y-you don’t need to be so overprotective... I told you I want to get stronger, remember?”

“R-right... Sorry, I’m trying to act like normal, but it’s not that easy.”

“...I want to be with you all. I won’t ever convince myself I can do something on my own again. We only got this far together *because* I’d already failed at that once, but I...” Elitia’s determination to get stronger had led me to believe it’d take some time for her feelings to truly change—but I was wrong. “Weapons respond to the emotions of their users. If that’s true, then I can’t afford to let this sword push me around anymore. I want to use it to make sure I can be with you all, for real this time.”

Something was about to change; I was absolutely convinced of that. Elitia’s perspective had shifted dramatically, and she was trying to move toward the better—the spirited fire that had returned to her eyes guaranteed it.

“...I’m sure you can do it, Elitia,” I reassured her.

“I believe in you, too, Ellie, and so do all the other girls. We wouldn’t be whole without you,” Igarashi added. “This experience has made me want to get stronger, too...to press on and get just the tiniest bit closer to you without giving it up as impossible that I’ll ever be at your level.”

“...Kyouka.”

Igarashi took Elitia’s hands in hers. Elitia quickly averted her gaze and said, “...I felt warm, while you held me. I was really happy you all came for me... S-so...”

Seraphina and Theresia were also watching Elitia, who’d flushed bright red. Her hands still in Igarashi’s, Elitia told her, “Thank you. For not giving up on me.”

“Did you really think I ever would? Oh, and you should’ve *seen* Atobe. Once he realized you hadn’t come back, he was like a totally different person...”

“W-well, you know... I was worried, too, and kept kicking myself for not being *more* overprotective and letting you go off on your own...”

I might have denied it a moment before, but I had to face the truth—it was time for a fresh start.

“...But next time I’m so worried I can’t decide what to do, I’m going to ask some questions that cross boundaries I’ve stopped myself from stepping over until now. I’ve got to forget about so-called adult discretion or the idea that I shouldn’t pry into people’s private lives, even if they are my party members. If I’m worried, I’ve got to be up front about it.”

“...Yeah. I’d really love if you did.”

“I get it, it may sound overbearing, but...wait, what?” Elitia smiled; Igarashi and Seraphina joined in. I even felt as if Murakumo was smirking from her sheath on my back.

“In my estimation, you have already earned the right to cross those personal boundaries, Master, though admittedly my expertise does not extend to the subtleties of human interaction.”

Does Murakumo recognize the joy in her expression? Or am I just imagining that in her voice?

Theresa patted my shoulder a few times. While I didn’t know exactly what she meant to convey, I couldn’t rule out a fondness behind the touch. Once we managed to free her from that mask, would she smile at times like this, too? In one more district above this, we’d find the Cathedral, and perhaps answers to Theresa’s situation—but even that one step still lay far out of our grasp for the moment. Nevertheless, that day would surely come as long as we all treasured our lives and the life we had together.

Part III: A Clue to Lift the Curse

It had grown quite late by the time we made it back to our lodgings near the Middle Guild. Since Seraphina would be an official member of our party for the foreseeable future, she came along with us. Adeline looked somewhat distraught to part with her, but she perked up a little after Seraphina reassured her, “Do not fear. This good-bye is only temporary.”

Our lodgings in this district were part of a multi-unit housing complex and had a living room, two large bedrooms, a bathroom, and a simple kitchen. Our unit took up the first of the building’s three floors. We walked through the hall in the common area and rang the bell at door 101. Almost immediately, it opened.

“Arihito,” Misaki said breathlessly, “is Ellie...?!”

“Yeah, she’s okay. That said, we’ve all been through a lot...but I’ll tell you more about it inside.”

As we entered the living room, Suzuna got up from the couch. Madoka, who had been petting Cion where she lay resting in a corner, jumped to her feet as soon as she realized we’d returned.

“Arihito...everyone...welcome back...!”

“Thanks, Madoka. Looks like Cion’s doing just fine, too... Suzuna, how are you feeling?”

“Much better after some rest, thank you. That delicious dinner was just as effective at speeding up recovery as we heard.”

Her stamina and magic had been fully replenished, thanks to the meal Maria made for us at the Forest Diner. Without it, we wouldn’t have been able to delve right back into a labyrinth after the grueling fight against The Calamity.

“...Suzuna,” Elitia began, “I need to apologize to—”

“...!”

But before Elitia could finish her sentence, Suzuna rushed toward her and

wrapped her in a silent embrace. Gently returning the hug by laying her hand on Suzuna's back, Elitia whispered, "I'm sorry I worried you."

"Yes...you really did have me scared to death. But all that matters is you made it back safely..."

"...Thank you. I won't ever put you through that again. And I promise I'll never again betray the trust you all have in me..."

Elitia and Suzuna smiled warmly at each other. Misaki turned away at the sight; when she turned back around, her eyes looked a little red—the touching scene had clearly moved her.

"*Haaah*, I was super worried, too, y'know?!" she insisted. "But nothing gets to me more than watching friends love it out, not even my own feelings. You're totally making me want to throw my arms around someone, too."

"I—I can understand that, but why is that someone me...?"

For a second, I was just as much at a loss for words as Igarashi—Misaki had latched on to her and brazenly burrowed her head into our vanguard's bosom.

"Hmm? C'mon, you've really gotten used to it recently, haven't you? Arihito, you get it, right? Don't you wanna just fluff these babies up?"

"*Cough, cough!*" I spluttered. "D-don't look at me like that, Igarashi..."

"Don't worry; I know you wouldn't dream of it. Misaki, doesn't it hurt to do that over my armor?"

"You're exactly right! The best time to fluff is when you're not in armored lady mode. You better watch out, Arihito's gonna come for you next time."

"Use me as a scapegoat all you want, but I'll only disappoint you... Uh, Igarashi?"

Not only did Igarashi not seem offended, but she was actually chuckling. I guess she had to laugh at Misaki's outrageous behavior. Next thing I knew, everyone but me seemed to have joined in on the joke.

"....."

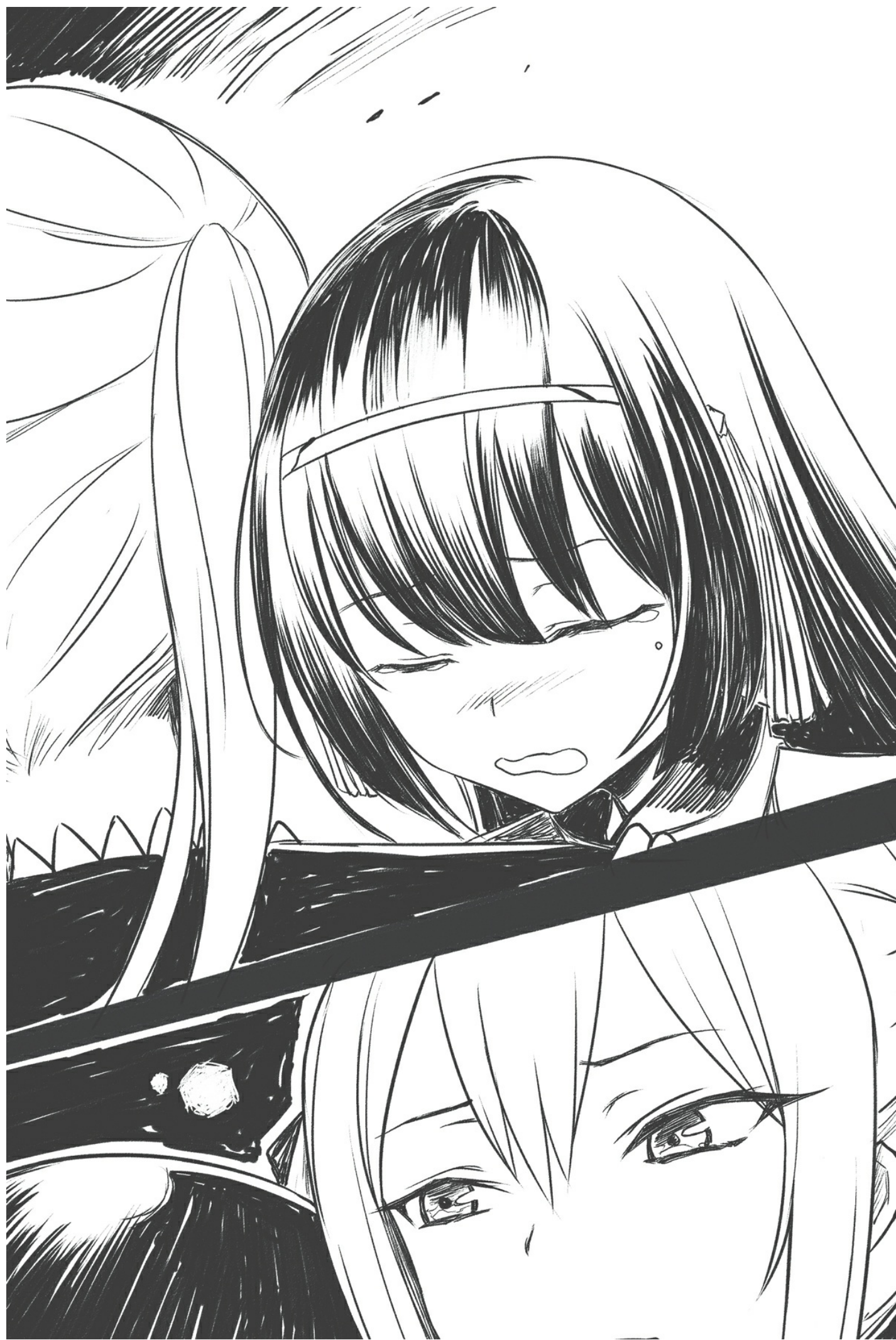
"Theresia..."

Every once in a while, I got the sense Theresia was smiling. Demi-humans supposedly lost the ability to feel emotions, but I'd never believed that for one minute. Even now, as Theresia tugged on my sleeve, I could almost see her grin. It appeared the pain from the Slave Seal had abated for the moment, but I doubted it had left entirely.

"Mr. Atobe, I'd recommend you have a doctor examine Ms. Theresia at the Healing Center," suggested Seraphina.

"Yes...that's a good idea," I agreed. "Do you think they'd see her this late?"

"Theresia, I'm so grateful you went to rescue Ellie even with broken armor... Thank you so much." Suzuna bowed in appreciation; Theresia slowly shook her head.



“We only got out of there alive because Theresia snuck up behind the Simian Lord, and she and Arihito hit him with a combination attack,” Elitia explained. “But Theresia...”

“Would you let me tell everyone about what happened?” I asked. “Let’s take a break and then meet up again in the living room.”

““““Okay!”””” they all replied together.

“Arf!”

“Heh-heh... Looks like Cion likes that plan, too. Atobe, are you okay to take the last bath, like usual? Or would you prefer we go to a public bath?” Igarashi asked.

This neighborhood had a spacious bath the ladies could use all together instead of waiting for their individual turns. *In that case, maybe I should go with them*—or so I thought, when—

“.....”

—Theresia gave me a look that said she wanted to stay here.

“Right... Atobe, the girls and I will go to the bath nearby, so take care of Theresia for us, okay?”

“Arihito, Louisa’s still at the Middle Guild, but she should be back soon,” Madoka informed me.

“Okay. I’ll look out for her.” Louisa had already come back to the lodgings once earlier in the day, but said she wanted to take care of something before the night was over.

Normally, raiding a labyrinth above your qualification level would incur penalties like a temporary halt on seeking. It could also cost you contribution points, and losing those could send you back a district, which made it a generally taboo venture. Louisa was currently negotiating an arrangement with the Guild Saviors headquarters that would allow us to access the labyrinth again. It would probably be difficult to secure any further special treatment, but if we didn’t ask today, we’d risk needing to fulfill all the requirements to enter the Blazing Red Mansion within the next six days.

We all need to be in top condition when we go for our rematch with the Simian Lord. That means we'll probably need a day to rest...and limits the number of times we can explore other labyrinths... I'll have to leave some room for error also, just in case any of our equipment or armor needs repair.

If we had to seek in another labyrinth to first augment our battle capabilities, then we'd be better off choosing one that holds the greatest potential benefits, like resources to fortify our equipment.

I heard the girls stop to speak with someone on their way out the door to the public baths—Ceres and Steiner had dropped by.

"Seems you ladies have gotten into another mess while I was holed up in the workshop," Ceres noted. "Theresia, don't tell me you were out and about with your suit in such tatters? I'll mend it by the morrow, so leave it with me tonight." She paused. "...What is it, Arihito?"

"Ceres, we managed to rescue Elitia from the Blazing Red Mansion."

"So I hear. And? You brought back something special, did you?"

"...Yes. The Shining Simian Lord used a skill called Etch-a-Hex on Theresia that affects her Slave Seal," I explained. "Her license says the seal is being overwritten. The Simian Lord uses that Etch-a-Hex to force people into servitude."

"A hex... I see. No doubt it's a trump card."

"Master, that rings a bell for you, doesn't it?"

Ceres plopped down on the sofa then fished a thin, leather-bound book from the bag she'd slung over her shoulder. I took it to be some kind of notebook. "...Theresia, would you mind showing me the mark?" she asked.

"....."

Theresia looked to me. I nodded in encouragement, and she turned her back to Ceres then unhooked her suit. Locks of hair peeked out of her mask, covering the nape of her neck. Ceres gently slid them out of the way to examine the Slave Seal. I couldn't see it from where I stood, but I imagined it had already begun to change shape.

“...Not in my wildest dreams did I expect to see this here,” Ceres muttered. Putting on her glasses, she took out a quill pen and ink and started scribbling something in the notebook. “We can’t have you catching cold now. Arihito, if you would.”

“R-right...”

As Theresia stood there half-naked, I approached from behind with extra caution, then hung my jacket on her shoulders. She drew the collar together.

“...What a true gentleman. The others must tell you all the time how adorable that is, no?”

“Precisely what endears him to them, I imagine. It must be an aspect of his personality, as he’s far too spry yet for his seeds to have withered.”

“I—I really don’t think this is the time for that kind of talk...,” I stammered.

“Oh, I know that. Arihito, what are your thoughts on the skills in the Labyrinth Country?”

“Skills...? I suppose they’re techniques suited to each individual person’s occupation, though I’ve seen a few that are shared among different jobs.” I gave Ceres the best answer I could think of, though I wasn’t sure if that’s what she was asking. Apparently, I hadn’t entirely missed the mark.

“Indeed... In the Labyrinth Country, personal aptitude influences the outcome of most phenomena, but that does not necessarily mean those phenomena can be expressed in unlimited patterns. Of course, this is not a hard-and-fast rule, but what I’ve learned through experience.”

“Experience...?”

“Even I have more questions than answers about this place,” she confessed. “And yet ignorant as I still may be, I do have some wisdom to offer as your senior here.” She showed me a page of her notebook inscribed with a mark of the same size as the Slave Seal but of a different pattern. “The Etch-a-Hex skill results in marking the victim with a seal like this. In Theresia’s case, I reckon she has six more days until the seal is completed.”

“Isn’t that the same amount of time that Mr. Atobe’s party can stay in District

Five...?" Steiner asked.

Ceres nodded in reply. "The seal may begin to affect Theresia's performance even before it is complete. If you deem it best she not join you on seeking expeditions, Steiner and I can look after her... But I must warn you: If you do not successfully undo the hex before you vanquish the Simian Lord, it may remain on her forever."

I'd thought we could save Theresia if we just defeated the Simian Lord, but Ceres's warning dashed those hopes. "So we need to figure out how to undo the hex...before we take the Simian Lord down...?"

Ceres nodded again. Then, looking at me, she smiled and noted, "I must say, you do not appear very ruffled by the prospect of even greater obstacles added to your already trying situation."

"I've accepted this will take all we have. Tomorrow, I plan to find out as much as I can about lifting hexes."

"That brings me back to my original question. Presuming other Seekers possess a skill similar to Etch-a-Hex, then we can assume with a high degree of probability that there are those who possess the skill to undo it. There is often overlap between the skills monsters and Seekers wield, you see."

"Oh, so that's what you were getting at."

"Ceres, can you think of anyone who might have a skill like that?" I asked.

For a moment, she did not answer; her gaze drifted off into the distance. Then she chuckled, wrote something else on a new page, ripped it out, and folded it, then handed it to me. "Perhaps it was fate that it happened in this district. An old acquaintance of mine may live here, though it has been ages since we last met, and I cannot say anything with confidence."

"And this person has some skill related to hexes? All right, I'll try whatever I can to find them."

"I'm afraid I can't promise a letter of introduction from me will do you any good, but better to have it. I would suggest you begin your search at the archive. It should have some information regarding how to lift Etch-a-Hex curses."

So this person Ceres knows might have a way we can remove the curse—let's hope I find a clue as to how to locate them at the archive.

"It'd be best if you introduced Mr. Arihito yourself."

"It would be more prudent for Arihito to go directly instead of me. But leaving that aside... The two of us shall plug away in the workshop all night, but I need to discuss the issue of strengthening your armaments before then. I'll finish Theresa's suit by the morn, but I imagine you have quite a few resources piled up."

"Yes, that would be great. Thank you. Umm, Theresa..."

"Perhaps you ought to first take a bath? We can take Theresa's suit here."

Something more than *Well, she already took it off once, so we might as well have it hid* behind those words. Though not overt, I felt a certain *pressure*—Ceres and Steiner appeared set on pushing me in a particular direction.

"....."

"...Yeah, I guess we can all take a bath together today. Is that okay with you, Theresa?"

"Of course it's all right. Steiner and I have dipped our toes in the same tub with you, have we not?"

"U-um... Master, maybe Arihito and Theresa should have the bath to themselves tonight? It must be a lot of work for you to make the steam so thick every time."

"Oh no, Mist Spell doesn't take much magic to activate... What, was I the only one who saw this as a golden opportunity?"

"Pardon me, Ms. Ceres, but what exactly might you mean by *golden opportunity*...?" Louisa asked as she walked into the living room. She had a spare key and could come and go as she pleased, but for some reason, her smile felt almost sinister.

"Louisa, care to join us and give Arihito a good scrub?" Ceres offered. "A young lass like you in the prime of womanhood needs a little magic to cheer up her days."

“...Y-you make it sound as if I have none...,” she stammered. “But I would genuinely love to help relieve some tension after a hard day’s work, Mr. Atobe. Would you allow me to accompany you?”

“S-sure... Wait, what?”

Only after giving in to Louisa’s request did I realize the craziness I’d agreed to. Ceres ate up the scene, and Steiner’s shoulders trembled slightly in laughter. It probably never occurred to our armored friend, but watching a suit of armor chuckle was actually rather cute.

Part IV: Five-Star Qualifications

In my previous life, I'd always thought sharing a bath with someone required even more intimacy than sleeping in the same room. We'd fortunately managed to find swimsuits for everyone, but Ceres and the others opted not to use them in the bath. Apparently, they wouldn't feel quite as refreshed or clean with them on, so I alone wore swim trunks. Louisa had on a ladies' wraparound specifically for bathing, but she said she planned to remove it when soaking in the tub. That, I decided, would be my cue to leave.

"*Pheeew...*" Ceres sighed contentedly. "Well, they certainly didn't skimp on your bath, did they? Now this is what I call the promising Advanced Seeker treatment."

"For our help in quelling the stampede, the Guild Savors also kindly named us All-Star Seekers," I told her. "I imagine we have that to thank for the comfortable reception as well."

"*Haaah... You might want to keep a little more feminine modesty in mind, Master. Steam doesn't magically excuse everything, no matter how thick you make it,*" Steiner admonished.

"You've been blathering on about propriety since the dressing room! Just because you'll never get clean wearing that helmet and armor does not mean we should not," retorted Ceres.

"*I-I'm not wearing anything—I'm living armor. This suit of armor is part of my body.*"

Ceres's carefree spirit proved a little too breezy for Steiner—the jade had quickly rinsed off before the rest of us and promptly slipped into the tub. Though she retained her younger form, she was still much older than me; these contrasting points left me at a loss for how best to treat her.

"Mr. Atobe, you're tensing your shoulders a bit. Please try to relax."

"O-okay... Thank you, Louisa."

She'd offered to give me a shiatsu massage before we washed up. It felt so heavenly, I had to hold in moans of pleasure with each touch. She must've been activating a skill on me, because slowly but surely, my exhaustion seemed to dissolve under her fingers.

"This massage helps to drain your lymph nodes," she explained. "You'll feel like a new man after your bath."

"That must do wonders for skin care, too. I'll bet the ladies would love this."

"Oh yes. If we have a few days off, I'd like to offer a massage to any of the girls who might be interested. Of course, I'll also give you a more in-depth..." She trailed off. "Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

Her hands stopped. She'd been stroking the muscles below my neck from top to bottom, and my shoulders were already feeling considerably more loosened. After a brief pause, she continued massaging.

"Now that Arihito has reached a higher level, I imagine you find yourself accumulating contribution points more quickly," Ceres inferred.

"But I thought you could only earn those points in the labyrinth...?"

"For Seekers like you, yes. However, support staff activate their skills on a daily basis during their work in town, which prevents level loss and can even help them rise in level as well. The latter is a rather tall order, however."

"I think I may have gone up a level," Louisa informed us. "I'll check my license once we're done here."

"That's great to hear. You're always working so hard for us."

I supposed this all meant that people with healing skills, for example, could maintain their level or gain experience points by treating someone in town. Falma the Chest Cracker, for instance, had said she'd lost ground while taking time off to care for her children, but she could be close to making all that up by this point. She probably didn't see too many rare chests in District Eight, but I imagined even common ones counted for something.

"How did I put it, 'Personal aptitude influences the outcome of

phenomena...’?” Ceres mused. “In your case, Louisa, I believe that may put you at some disadvantage.”

“You may be right... I can’t even join labyrinth expeditions, and this is the only kind of situation where I can assist Mr. Atobe...”

“N-not at all... You shouldn’t let that get you down. If anything, I feel bad leaving you so much work to do for us,” I replied, then heard Louisa giggle behind me.

“If you could only hear what the ladies and I say about you behind closed doors, you’d know there’s no reason for you to feel bad at all.”

“Precisely,” Ceres agreed. “You ladies have enough youthful spirit to spare, especially you and Kyouka.”

“As do you, in my estimation, Ms. Ceres...,” Louisa countered. “Am I wrong?”

“...*Cough! Cough!*” Ceres began spluttering.

I often found myself coughing when hit with a surprise like that, too, but I wouldn’t have pictured the experienced jade would as well. Odd as it was, the similarity made me feel closer to her.

“...Well, I don’t suppose any excuses will serve me at this point. Arihito is, as Chiara mentioned before, certainly a fine, strapping young man, but he is also wonderfully unspoiled and honest.”

“I have been called a simple saint before, but I’m not nearly so saintly. I’m just a regular, average guy.”

“No regular, average guy could remain that calm in a situation like this,” Steiner insisted. *“Are you sure you weren’t an emperor in your previous life and just didn’t notice it?”*

“This may be a safe space, but that’s going too far,” chided Ceres. “Chiara, deactivate Manipulate and get over here this instant. That’s an order.”

“I apologize. I’ll be polite, I promise. Mr. Atobe, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Does Manipulate have something to do with Steiner’s living armor? If I take its

name literally, then it must be a skill that allows the user to maneuver something, which means Ceres would use it to manipulate Steiner from within.

“Hmph... A merciful ruler, indeed. I imagine you might have been able to write ‘Emperor’ as your occupation and have it accepted, Arihito.”

“N-no, no, no. I don’t take offense easily but I definitely don’t have that kind of talent.”

“Tee-hee...” Louisa giggled. “What do you think, Ms. Theresia?”

“.....”

Part of me couldn’t help but see Steiner’s point. With Louisa massaging my back and Theresia dutifully scrubbing me down as usual, I certainly struck an imperial figure.

“Theresia very clearly cares deeply for you, Mr. Atobe,” Louisa remarked. “One’s emotions manifest most plainly through touch.”

“.....!” I doubted Louisa meant to tease Theresia, but her lizard mask flushed bright red all the same. “.....”

Theresia kept scrubbing away regardless. She was in a bathing wrap, which she wouldn’t have worn if I hadn’t insisted. Where did she get the courage to be so bold? Was she that confident in her life before becoming a demi-human? Or did the Slave Seal make her more assertive? Either way, if what Louisa said was true, then I wanted to show Theresia the same care she lavished on me.

“...I get it. It’s hard not to feel self-conscious when there are lots of people around.”

“.....”

Though Theresia said nothing, her hands froze for a moment. She probably wanted to avoid situations where other people might see her Slave Seal begin to change.

“Forgive me—I assumed that since your hair hid it, you would not mind our presence,” Ceres said. “That was rather indelicate of me.”

“.....,”

“Hmm... Do you mean to say it is no bother?”

“I think so,” I told her. Theresia nodded a few times.

Clearly relieved, Ceres smiled and leisurely stretched her legs out in the warm water. Her porcelain skin peeked above the surface; given her youthful appearance, it looked to me like she was playfully splashing about.

“Louisa, you might ask Arihito to wash your back, too,” Ceres suggested. “I’ll intervene should any impropriety threaten to happen.”

“O-oh, no, I’m fine. I wouldn’t dream of imposing on Mr. Atobe...”

“.....”

I’d tried to return the favor and wash Theresia’s back—and check the status of her Slave Seal while I was at it—but she brushed me away as if to say she could wait.

“Umm...,” I hedged. “Louisa, I am a man, after all, so if you feel uncomfortable, you don’t have to...”

“...How will I explain this to Ms. Kyouka later?” she fretted. “...Are you quite sure you don’t mind?” Looking a little abashed, Louisa nevertheless sat on a bathing chair and turned her back to me. And that’s when it hit me—this meant she would have to remove her wrap. “...I’d love that, Mr. Atobe.”



I’d wondered for a while if Louisa got tight shoulders, and to make a long story short, I was right.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Atobe...to put you through such trouble.”

“No, it’s nothing. I’m pretty used to this kind of thing.”

Back at the orphanage, we used to give the elderly teachers coupons for back rubs. Never before this moment had I ever considered how they must have felt when they happily accepted them—

No, I can’t go there. I’ll get too sentimental.

“Mr. Atobe...I looked into...the five-star labyrinth...qualifications...we discussed...”

“Louisa, what has got your speech so staccato? Are Arihito’s fingers that magical?” Ceres asked.

“Y-yes...I feel so much better. Are you really sure...you don’t mind doing so much...?”

“The tension in your shoulders is clear as day, but I must admit I feel a few pangs of jealousy,” said Ceres. “No matter what I do, mine cannot become so tight.”

“.....”

Theresia laid her hand over her chest—I got a distinct feeling Leila would have my head if she saw what I was having her former charge do.

“To earn the right to enter a five-star labyrinth, parties must reach the third floor in two other labyrinths in District Five and twice earn more than three thousand contribution points in a single expedition,” Louisa explained.

My party and I had only made it to the third floor in a fraction of the labyrinths we’d explored so far. In the first labyrinth we ever ventured into in this country, the Field of Dawn, we stumbled upon a secret portal to the third floor. But as seeking out the final floor took a lot of time we didn’t often have, we usually just accomplished whatever we set out to do in a labyrinth and moved on to the next.

“The bit about reaching third floors sounds straightforward enough, and you could always use a Return Scroll, but I daresay you’ll need to strategize which monsters to engage to reach that three thousand figure,” mused Ceres. Unless we ran into a Named Monster, we’d need to defeat a considerable host of foes to amass that many contribution points.

So beating thirty level-10 monsters would earn us three thousand points... And the Death Stalkers we fought were level 11. We’ll be completely spent if we need to defeat that many monsters, and in one go, no less. There’s no skirting around the real skill required to do all that...

Even the Seekers who’d gone into the Blazing Red Mansion after Rury’s weapons must have had what it took to make their living in District Five. They must’ve braved the Simian Lord’s domain despite the great risks in hopes it

would lead to a great reward—or maybe the chance to fight one of the ape’s captive Seekers. After all, our licenses counted them as monsters. Injuring their foes probably wouldn’t affect their karma. That thought must’ve been what really scared Elitia. We’d seen people turn against fellow humans far too often.

“You’ll also need a cumulative total of twenty thousand contribution points, but you’ve already earned a considerable sum of special contribution points, so you’ll have a head start,” Louisa explained.

“If I remember correctly, special contribution points carry over to each new district and count toward the total number you need to move up to the next, right?”

“Precisely. They can also cover any penalties for long lapses in seeking, though I strongly recommend you avoid falling into that situation to begin with...” Louisa’s voice trailed off. “...Mr. Atobe...”

“Ah...! S-sorry. Let me rinse you off.” Caught up in the serious discussion, I’d forgotten I was still massaging Louisa’s shoulders, but she’d probably had enough. Theresia scooped up some warm water and handed the bucket to Louisa. This part was usually best done by the person herself.

“Arihito, I’ve noticed life force welling up within Louisa these past few minutes,” noted Ceres. “Have you been using some sort of skill on the lass?”

“Yes, it helps heal party members in front of me,” I explained. “We had Louisa temporarily join our party, so I imagine it’s been active this whole time.”

“I had no idea...,” Louisa murmured in wonder. “I did feel my body grow warmer and the tension in my shoulders relax, but I assumed I had your skills as a masseur to thank for that.”

I’d just taken advantage of the chance to ease the fatigue from her body, but come to think of it, would activating a skill like that in a vulnerable place like this raise our Trust Levels, too?

“Perhaps I’ll ask you to work your magic on me next time. Should you feel satisfied with my efforts, would you consider it?” Ceres asked.

“Of course. I’d be happy to, and it doesn’t have to be in the bath.”

“No need to be so shy...,” she teased. “But I should stop myself there, or you’ll all lose your patience with me.”

“Let’s have a meeting once we’re done here, Master,” Steiner suggested. *“I just had Melissa show me the newest monster resources they acquired, and I think we’ll be able to offer quite a few suggestions.”*

“I swear, you lot never cease to amaze me, but you truly outdid yourselves this time. What in the world is that scorpion you have suspended in ice?”

We’d had The Calamity sent to our Repository to harvest for resources. I couldn’t even begin to imagine what we could make from it, but I’d bet that any defensive gear crafted out of its exoskeleton would provide powerful protection.

“In that case, please allow me to review your results from the stampede and the Blazing Red Mansion before you turn in for the evening,” requested Louisa.

“I will, thank you.”

Louisa’s hand drifted over to where she usually kept her monocle, reaffirming the impression I’d gotten the very first time we reported our results—she seemed most alive when engrossed in her work.

“...Please don’t concern yourself about the late hour. I’m quite the night owl,” she reassured me.

“A nighttime receptionist—how very intriguing... If only my occupation held such enticing allure.”

“Master, you’re going to scare off all the men if you keep making nothing but dirty jokes.”

Ceres’s particular sense of humor wasn’t about to scare me away, but I felt I’d set a bad example if I replied at all in front of Theresia. I did, however, want to ask Ceres in as gentle a manner as possible to treat me as an adult going forward.

CHAPTER 2

Expedition Reports and Skill Meetings

Part I: All-Star Seekers

Once the ladies had returned from their baths, I told them to relax in their rooms while I went over our results with Louisa and then met with Ceres and Steiner.

“Now then, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll examine your license...,” Louisa began. “Oh my. I had expected as much, but this is incredible...”

◆Previous Expedition Results◆

- > Suppressed stampede from a 5-★ labyrinth: 5000 points
- > Earned Most Distinguished Seeker status for stampede contributions: 2000 points
- > ARIHITO grew to level 8: 80 points
- > THERESIA grew to level 8: 80 points
- > KYOUKA grew to level 7: 70 points
- > ELITIA grew to level 11: 110 points
- > SUZUNA grew to level 6: 60 points
- > MISAKI grew to level 6: 60 points
- > MELISSA grew to level 8: 80 points
- > CION grew to level 7: 70 points
- > SERAPHINA grew to level 12: 120 points
- > Helped defeat 1 DEATH STALKER: 55 points
- > Defeated 1 ★THE CALAMITY: 4800 points
- > Party members’ Trust Levels increased: 270 points
- > Fought alongside MARCUS’s party: 10 points
- > Fought alongside KOZELKA’s party: 10 points

> Rescued CURT: 100 points

> Rescued FRAN: 100 points

> Returned with 1 BLACK TREASURE CHEST: 50 points

Seeker Contribution: 13,125 points

Cumulative Special Contribution: 15,000 points

District Seven Provisional Contribution Ranking: 345

“I’ve never seen Seekers earn five figures in a single expedition...,” Louisa marveled.

“Even so, we didn’t take number one in the all-time contribution ranking. Definitely makes me realize there will always be greater heights to reach.”

“I imagine the parties who left those records must have delved into a labyrinth for several days and defeated a considerable number of monsters in that time. You all grew in level as well, since you came from District Seven and earned a great deal of points in doing so...” She paused. “Normally, it would be impossible to leave such an extraordinary record in mere hours.”

We’d made the impossible possible—when put that way, it sounded like a big achievement, but Kozelka and the other Guild Savors had assisted us in defeating The Calamity, and we owed much of our success to the weapon installed into the very city itself. While Murakumo, Alphecca, and Ariadne also lent us an enormous hand, their efforts didn’t appear listed on our expedition results. My license did record their movements, but these had not counted toward our contribution points—was that some sort of rule?

“Louisa, we got a lot of help from our Hidden God—from Ariadne—during the battle. Does the Guild not assign points for her work? I’ve seen this in previous results so it’s kind of late in the game to ask, but...”

“Oh, so you’re curious about whether Hidden Gods are evaluated by the same rubric as Seekers? As a rule, the Guild does not require Seekers to disclose whether they have any understandings with Hidden Gods as they are sacred and revered deities in the Labyrinth Country. The Guild recognizes we are not so omnipotent an organization as to cast judgment on the workings of the

gods.”

“I see. Thank you. If the Guild can’t do it...then I’d like to find some other way to personally thank and honor the gods for all their assistance.”

“I am naught but a Stellar Sword, a weapon to serve you, Master...though I imagine such an explanation will not suffice to satisfy you. If you should like to show me thanks, I would ask you to provide me with more resources such as the Sickle Blades you once used to strengthen my blade,” Murakumo told me from the sword stand where I’d left her. I actually had a question for her, so I asked Louisa to wait for a moment while I turned inward and telepathically spoke with Murakumo.

“You told me before that the Sickle Blades enabled you to use new skills. Did you mean the Blade of Heaven and Earth: Steel Slice?”

“Yes, indeed. While you did not realize it, the Ocean Mantises had a skill called Severing Steel Slash capable of destroying metallic equipment. Apparently, the sickles provide additional power against insect-type monsters if used to reinforce weapons, though the effect is different on me,” the sentient blade explained, describing just another of the myriad aspects that set ethereal weapons like Murakumo apart from all others. Without ever changing their original shape, they could absorb the power stored in monster resources and learn new skills. Even so, we’d had to ask for our Hidden God’s enormous hand to help Murakumo slice through the Simian Lord’s Helltect Steel.

“I fear this may sound defeatist, but I greatly doubt whether I can sever that blasted chain once more. Even my ethereal power is tested when wielded by the holy hand of a Mechanical God...,” Murakumo admitted. *“Although I would regenerate if my blade were to shatter, it would take at least ten days.”*

“All right, I’ll keep that in mind. Could you let me know if any of our resources might help augment your skills?”

“Yes, with gratitude... I must also warn you: Now that the Simian Lord has seen the difficulty we had in severing its Helltect Steel, it may very well utilize it as an ultimate means of defense.”

It had been clear for all to see how elated the Simian Lord became as it ensnared Alphecca in its chains and dragged her toward it. We’d have to

prepare as many options as we could to fight back against those restraints and prevent them from putting us in an impossible situation. Strengthening Murakumo definitely counted as an option, but I had to explore other avenues as well. If in the end I did have to rely on the Stellar Blade to slice through the Helltect Steel once more, I'd have to augment her power or prepare to see her shatter upon first strike.

We couldn't realistically hope to thwart all enemy attacks that posed real threats to us. With the Simian Lord, we'd very likely only scratched the surface of what it could do. If we were lucky, it wouldn't have robust defenses against status ailments, but previous experience had shown more often than not that Named Monsters under extreme pressure wielded abilities not only to cancel out such ailments but also to bolster their other stats.

"Some tea for you, Mr. Atobe."

"Th-thank you, Louisa. I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"How very like you to have acquired such an invaluable weapon as a talking sword."

Though every little thing I'd done had sent Louisa for a loop at first, recently she'd come to expect the unexpected as "very like Mr. Atobe." I took a sip of the tea she'd prepared; it was pleasantly hot and immediately warmed me up, banishing any worry I'd catch cold after cooling down from the hot bath.

"If you'll allow me to go back to your results, you will receive a five-thousand-gold-piece reward for defeating the monster responsible for the stampede."

"The Calamity didn't appear to have a bounty," I pointed out. "Is that because it hadn't yet harmed any Seekers?"

"Exactly. Instead, the Guild calculated the bounty it should have carried based on factors such as the damage it inflicted upon the town... The true bounty may have amounted to an even greater sum, but District Five has a five-thousand-gold-piece cap on first-time bounty receivers."

We'd never even considered waiting for the bounty on it to increase before moving on the monster, so the five-thousand-piece reward was more than enough.

“Now, allow me to examine your results from the Blazing Red Mansion. Though you did leave almost immediately after entering the labyrinth, you did rescue Elitia and as a result will not lose any contribution points.”

◆Expedition Results◆

- > Raided 1F through 2F of BLAZING RED MANSION: 20 points
- > Retreated from fight with forces under ☆SHINING SIMIAN LORD's command: -30 points
- > Engaged in battle with forces under ☆SHINING SIMIAN LORD's command for a fixed duration: 10 points
- > Fled the labyrinth quickly after raiding: -30 points
- > Party members' Trust Levels increased: 10 points
- > Rescued ELITIA: 100 points

Seeker Contribution: 80 points

District Five Provisional Contribution Ranking: 345

Elitia had been automatically removed from my official party the minute she ventured into the labyrinth on her own. Though she had rejoined our ranks as soon as we'd found her, our licenses still evidently registered retrieving her as a Rescue. Eighty points wouldn't affect our standing in the district, but I was just glad we hadn't lost anything. Scanning the results, I noticed something curious.

“...The Simian Lord is a hollow-starred monster, I see.”

“Oh, you're right... Perhaps it shares some commonality with the Mirage Morpho?”

Kozelka had explained that Seekers who defeated a hollow-starred monster would earn a special certification. What did these monsters have in common—maybe some particular way of interfering with Seekers outside of normal battle?

The Simian Lord's underling was a normal black-starred Named Monster. What did the Mirage Morpho have that set it apart...? Oh, the skill that affects our karma. Does the Simian Lord have some similar capability...?

The “Guard” in “Demon Monkey Guard” probably meant it served as the gatekeeper to some hellish prison. And the Simian Lord, its master, traps and bends Seekers to its will. In other words, the fact that the Simian Lord built that fortress or prison makes me think it might somehow affect our karma simply by setting foot inside. That said, I couldn’t claim with any confidence that all hollow-starred monsters could manipulate our karma with just two examples, but as a working theory, it made sense.

“I’ve heard Seekers earn a special honor if we defeat a hollow-starred monster. Do you know anything about that, Louisa?”

“No...I’m afraid not. Before I met you, I only dealt with the more mundane aspects of clerical duty, so I never even imagined I’d have the opportunity to handle such extraordinary cases. But...” Her voice trailed off.

Louisa had looked a little disappointed when we took the day off to enjoy the Islet of Illusion since she hadn’t been able to join us on our expedition—now, however, her eyes shone with what felt like renewed determination.

“As your dedicated support staff, my official role and authorizations will continue to evolve as you progress. My superior only today reminded me of this fact. Now that you have become All-Star Seekers, my position has evidently gone from General Employee to Specially Appointed Staff, and my salary will also rise accordingly...”

“Whoa! That’s wonderful news. Congratulations, Louisa! This calls for a celebration!” I exclaimed in a rather uncharacteristically loud voice.

Raises and promotions apparently held more allure for me than I’d expected, and I rejoiced for Louisa as if I were moving up the ladder myself. The recognition must’ve also represented all the great work she did at the Guild.

“Th-that’s far too kind...” She demurred humbly. “I have you and your party to thank for everything. I’ve actually been thinking of adding my salary to the party’s shared finances—though, that said, I haven’t yet received any remittance since we first began to work together.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize. Well, at the end of the month maybe we can—no, we’ll absolutely have to go out for drinks to celebrate a job well done. That is, after we resolve this situation, of course.”

“...Thank you. Of course, I can wait as long as necessary. The most important things for me are that you and your party return safe and sound from your expeditions, and that you have many more such adventures to come.”

Louisa and I shook hands as if to renew our partnership and, on my part, to express in the best way I could for the moment how happy I was for her promotion.

“.....”

“Oh, Theresia...thank you,” Louisa said, taking Theresia’s outstretched hand. “I look forward to our continued collaboration, too.”

With that, she retreated to her bedroom, one of the two in the suite that she would share with Igarashi, Seraphina, and Melissa.

Misaki, Suzuna, Elitia, and Madoka seemed to have become fast friends; boisterous giggles and chatter escaped their room every once in a while. Just then, a rather drained-looking Ceres, who had been passing the time with them, exited the bedroom and grabbed a cold bottle from the magic-stone-powered fridge.

Part II: Scorpion and Morpho Equipment

“I can hardly keep up with those whippersnappers...” Ceres sighed. “Ah, but look at me, indulging in your refreshments without asking.”

“You’re always free to help yourself,” I assured her. “Ceres, do you have time for a meeting now?”

“Mm, that I do... Steiner, I never made you out to be a dog lover.”

“Oh yes. Just sitting next to her gives me great comfort,” Steiner replied.

They’d been sitting as still as a statue next to Cion, who lay sprawled out on the floor, but they came to life at their master’s call—I had to admit, I was dying to know what went on under that armor.

Getting to their feet with a loud clatter, Steiner took a cross-legged seat on the floor by us; evidently, the sofa would not have held their weight.

“Sorry I can’t take a more proper seat. I promise I am listening, though, so please go ahead.”

“Have you not grown tired of only removing all that before bed...?” Ceres asked wearily. “Well, it matters not to me.”

“I-I’m going to jump right in. These are the new resources we picked up.”

◆Materials Available for Processing◆

Materials from 1 ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO

> ☆MERCIFUL WINGED MIRAGE MORPHO scaled feeler x1

> DEATH STALKER stinger x1

Materials from 1 Frozen ★THE CALAMITY

> ★THE CALAMITY stinger x1

Studying the list, Ceres brought her hand to her chin and fell into deep thought with a *hmmm*.

“You have two Named Monsters to dissect, yet only select parts of each can be used as resources. Many monsters lose characteristic strengths or functions after they perish, after all... I must say, this is rather interesting.”

“I looked into that giant scorpion, but it seems to have resistance against all status ailments. How did you manage to freeze it like that?”

“Misaki used her deck of cards to force a vulnerability on it,” I explained. “After that, ice attacks proved extremely effective.”

“Ahhh yes, the Jester’s Wildcards. Or rather, Steel Magic Cards, as they became once I added a rune... I’m pleased to hear you found use for them. Nothing warms an artisan’s heart more.” Ceres beamed from ear to ear, looking exceedingly happy. Up until then, I hadn’t often pointed out which gear or armor came in handy during our battles, but her smile made me want to update her more frequently going forward.

“Fortunately, the portion of the scorpion’s stinger that emits the laser beams—the Queen Scorpion’s Afterglow—has only fallen dormant in this frozen state and still retains its functionality. Historical records show the last Seeker to defeat The Calamity removed this section on the spot immediately after the monster expired to preserve its capabilities...,” Ceres informed me. “This sort of information would be an invaluable addition to the archive. With it, future Seekers will learn they can freeze a monster’s body and avoid the rush to dissect it.”

“D-do you really think so...? I suppose some resources you can only get in very special circumstances. Is that Queen Scorpion’s Afterglow still attached to the body?”

“Melissa’s Assess identified the usable portions of the monsters, but she’s kept everything stored away until you instruct her to begin the dissection. It’s probably best to use them right away, in any case.”

The thoughtful measures Melissa had taken left me speechless. Monster resources were still far beyond me, and it was a huge relief to know Melissa had the knowledge and skills to handle them for us.

“If we combine the Queen Scorpion’s Afterglow with its stinger, we can make a weapon...no, better yet, artillery, which replicates The Calamity’s laser. It

would have far too much weight for any individual person to equip, but as long as you can find a way to transport it, you'll add a mighty weapon of incredibly rare power to your arsenal."

A heavy piece of artillery—if we decided to use it, we could ask Alphecca to carry it for us. "How long would it take to create that from the Afterglow and the stinger?"

"At least three days, if you can spare them. With weapons of this caliber, you do need to do a proper test run after all."

"All right. Then, let's go with that."

"We could use all the other resources you have as well," suggested Steiner. "If you want to replace weapons you're currently using, you'll need to find replacements, of course."

I'll keep that in mind and have them bolster our equipment. We might be able to find some good weapons on the market in District Five—I'll ask Madoka what she thinks.



After asking Madoka to look into it, she showed me the weapons on sale in the district. Her membership in the Merchants Guild allowed her to review the items in stock at affiliated shops on her license without having to visit them in person. As I might've expected, the great demand for better-quality items left relatively slim pickings when it came to what might suit our party members' occupations. Even so, we did manage to find a few for purchase.

◆Items Ordered◆

- > NELZEX GAUNTLETS x2
- > NELZEX GREAVES x2
- > WHITE APOCYNUM SHROUD x1
- > WHITE APOCYNUM OVERALLS x1

Apparently, items made from a type of metal called nelzex silver sometimes went up for sale in District Five. Though they were not cheap, I bought two pairs

each of nelzex gauntlets and greaves for 800 and 1,000 gold pieces, respectively, and had Seraphina and Igarashi equip them. We also saw two items of clothing made from white apocynum, a softer and stronger material than regular hemp linen, which would be perfect for Suzuna and Melissa. I bought the shroud for 800 gold pieces, and the overalls for 1,000 gold.

All told, we spent 5,400 gold pieces, but our bounty from The Calamity covered almost everything. After having to spend such a large sum in one go, I decided we'd better watch our budget a little more closely and save up what we could.

In the end, we used resources from The Calamity to forge and bolster the following:

◆Materials Acquired from ★The Calamity◆

> Use QUEEN SCORPION'S AFTERGLOW and STINGER to forge ★QUEEN'S TAIL

> Apply ARM SPEAR to KYOUKA'S ★AMBIVALENZ → ★AMBIVALENZ will gain PIERCING STRIKE 2, +1 strength

> Apply SHELL to ELITIA'S HIGH MITHRIL KNIGHTMAIL → HIGH MITHRIL KNIGHTMAIL will gain METAL RESISTANCE 1, +8 strength

Max strength reached

> Apply SHELL to SERAPHINA'S ★MIRRORED SHELL PAVIS → ★MIRRORED SHELL PAVIS will gain METAL RESISTANCE 1, +1 strength

Since the scorpion's exoskeletal shell worked well in protective armor, I decided to apply it to our two vanguards' equipment. Steiner, who handled all the processing, said they'd finish Elitia's Knightmail by morning—I honestly could not begin to thank them enough.

We also harvested two spear-like arms, which, as I understood it, combined well with lances or similar weapons. I'd thought to use one of the arms on Igarashi's Elluminate Cross Spear, but there was some issue with the spear's strength, so instead we applied it to her Ambivalenz. The other arm we couldn't find any use for at the moment, and so we left it in storage.

Having already called Rikerton over, Melissa and her father got to dissecting The Calamity. She told me she'd wash up after she finished. I figured it'd probably be best to have her rest up the next morning as I'd be away visiting the archive in any event.

Next, we moved on to resources harvested from the Mirage Morpho, materials that went mainly to bolster my party members' protective gear. We replaced the bowstring on Suzuna's bow with one of the Morpho's feelers, an upgrade that also gave the bow an official name. Apparently, runes weren't the only additions that could bestow names on equipment.

◆Materials Acquired from ☆Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho◆

> Apply FEELER to SUZUNA's ASHWOOD BOW +1 → Modify to ★MIRAGE ECLIPSE BOW +1

> Apply FEELER to THERESIA's ELLUMINATE LASER SWORD +6 → ELLUMINATE LASER SWORD will gain INVISIBLE SLASH, +7 strength

> Apply UPPER WINGS to THERESIA's CHAMELEON BOOTS → CHAMELEON BOOTS will gain FIRE RESISTANCE 2, +1 strength

> Apply UPPER WINGS to MISAKI's BAT LEATHER JACKET +2 → BAT LEATHER JACKET +2 will gain FIRE RESISTANCE 2, +1 strength

> Apply LOWER WINGS to SERAPHINA's NELZEX GREAVES → NELZEX GREAVES will gain FIRE RESISTANCE 2, +1 strength

> Apply LOWER WINGS to CION's HOUND'S LEATHER VEST +3 → HOUND'S LEATHER VEST +3 will gain FIRE RESISTANCE 2, +4 strength

> Apply BUTTERFLY SCALES to ELITIA's ★DEXTERITY GAUNTLETS → ★DEXTERITY GAUNTLETS will gain FLARE DIVISION, +1 strength

We agreed our artisans would get started on these orders the next afternoon as they amounted to far too much work for one night. Once I found out the Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho's materials were fire resistant, I decided to bolster as many members' equipment with them as possible. Igarashi, Suzuna, and Elitia didn't need it as they already had accessories with fire-resistant properties. Still, I wanted to find other ways to further protect the others like

Melissa from such burns—it didn't take much imagination at all to assume the Shining Simian Lord most likely counted devastating fire attacks as part of its arsenal of skills we had not yet seen.

Lastly, we turned to the Death Stalker resources. This was what we decided to do:

◆Materials Acquired from Death Stalker◆

> Apply STINGER to SERAPHINA's ELLUMINATE BATTLE ROD → ELLUMINATE BATTLE ROD will gain POISON ATTACK 2, +2 strength

> Apply PINCERS to CION's ★BEAST CLAW +3 → ★BEAST CLAW +3 will gain BIND ATTACK 1, +4 strength

> Apply SHELL to KYOUKA's NELZEX GREAVES → NELZEX GREAVES will gain POISON RESISTANCE 2, +1 strength

Seraphina didn't often wield a weapon in battle, but she did carry a baton, and since she would soon inevitably engage more enemies at a much closer range, I figured it'd be best to give her a way to take advantage of the proximity and inflict status ailments on them. The pincers dredged up awful memories, images of Theresia trapped in their grip. Still, the Bind Attack 1 skill worked to stop the target in its tracks and, I imagined, might come in handy against the Simian Lord's captive Seekers. With that, we settled on a short-term schedule as Ceres and Steiner wouldn't get to the last load of orders for at least another day. Two runes we still hadn't used, but we did come up with a plan for them.

"You'd do well to apply this Alter Rune on your party's shield...," suggested Ceres. "I daresay Seraphina would work wonders with it, since she carries such a large shield, but it can only be affixed to armor. Ideally, you should find a suit with rune slots that fits her."

Cion bravely defended our party with Covering, but nothing beat a shield when it came to blocking the most vicious attacks an enemy could muster. I called Seraphina over and asked her thoughts.

"Thank you very much for using such precious materials on my equipment. And regarding the rune, I agree with the proposed plan. Where could we obtain

an armor with rune slots?" she asked Ceres. "Are they, as I expect, most likely found in labyrinths?"

"Indeed. It takes a great deal of rare, specific resources to forge weapons with rune slots from scratch. You might also combine a slotted piece of equipment with another to the same effect, but that poses another difficulty in that you need Sterling Silver Sand to weld them together. I imagine it's easier to come across in the upper districts, but the great demand for it makes it difficult to find on the market."

"Some did go on sale this afternoon but sold out almost immediately," Madoka informed us. "Apparently, bidding wars tend to lead a small number of people to hoard the sand, so it's sold at a fixed price of one thousand gold pieces."

Though she still retained her childlike charm, Madoka's prowess as a merchant always left me at a loss for words. I couldn't help but marvel at how she provided even more detail than I knew to ask for, smiling brightly all the while. Still, I couldn't task her with endlessly waiting for the silver to pop up on the market, knowing how unlikely the prospect was. In the end, our best bet would probably be finding a metal ingot to refine.

"A place rich in Sterling Silver Sand..." Ceres wondered aloud. "You may want to add that to your list of considerations as to which labyrinth you raid next."

"Yes, but we did also find a black treasure chest, so I'd like to open that first and then decide."

"You what...?!" she exclaimed, bewildered. "I suppose it's past time I let your every exploit surprise me. Falma, however, will be quite astonished at how regularly you call for her, I tell you. Come to think of it, I met Rikerton earlier. He was mighty pleased to be visiting District Five."

"He was?"

"Seems like his wife happens to be in this very district. He said she moved up from District Six about half a year ago."

Rikerton's wife apparently became a demi-human while pregnant with Melissa and was on a mission as a Seeker to find a way to return to her human

form, or so I'd heard. "Melissa hasn't mentioned anything yet, but I hope we can make time for her to meet her mother."

"You truly... No, I shan't continue, for I fear I've already bombarded you with too much praise. Arihito, you must not react with alarm when you see Rikerton's wife," Ceres warned. "Though I'm sure I have little to worry about with you in that regard."

Melissa's mother had apparently turned into a werecat. However, no matter what that had done to her appearance, I wanted to thank her for allowing Melissa to join our party.

"Mr. Arihito."

"Y-yes, Seraphina? Something wrong?" I spluttered, taken aback at how she suddenly switched to using my first name. Her flushed face led me to believe she must not have done so lightly.

"N-no... However, now that I have officially joined your party, I thought perhaps it might be impertinent to continue referring to you with such formality. Have I offended you...?"

"Of course not. If anything, I'm happy you feel comfortable with that. After all, I've been calling you Seraphina this whole time, not Lieutenant Edelbert."

"...Then I'll do the same. Mr. Arihito, the hour has grown quite late, but myself and the others still have energy to spare. May we proceed to skill discussions?"

"Good idea. We can start with you if you'd like," I agreed. "Theresia, come over here. You're up after."

"....."

Though I'd urged her to sit earlier, she'd stayed standing by me throughout the previous discussions. Finally, she gave in and took a seat next to me, making sure to leave a little space between us.

"...Young lasses these days confound me. How is it she takes no issue with sharing a bath but flushes at the thought of sharing a couch?"

"I actually feel like I get it... Come on, Master, we should get to the workshop."

“Quite. Arihito, do consider whether you’ll use the vellum rune as well. Given the power it contains, I imagine you may waver over whom to entrust it to...but when the situation calls for it, I am sure it will give you hope.”

And so Ceres and Steiner retreated for the night. Seraphina then took a seat across from me; only then did I notice she was dressed for bed in a rather casual combo of a thin tank-top-type shirt and shorts—all the more striking given I normally saw her in a full suit of armor.

“.....”

“...T-Theresia?” She was staring at me—maybe she’d read my mind.

This isn’t the time to be fixating on striking pajamas. I get it. You’re totally right.

I couldn’t be sure Theresia’s pointed gaze was meant to stop that line of thought, but my heart raced nervously all the same.

“Mr. Arihito...?”

“S-sorry. So...”

“There’s no need to be so nervous. Guild Saviors’ licenses are different, but not so special as that. Here, these are the skills I have.”

Her license was, in fact, shaped differently from regular Seekers’. Forcing myself to change gears, I studied the roster of her skills.

Part III: Skills Meeting

A quick look at Seraphina's license painted me a clear picture of the difficulty she'd had deciding where to allot her skill points.

◆Acquired Skills◆

Aura Shield

Suppressing March

Fanatic

Shield Parry

Defense Force

Wide Stance

Immovable Mass

Provoke

Secrets of the Shield 2

Shield Slam

Counter Tackle

Defensive Stance

Bodyguard

Training Method 1

Medicinal Herb Theory 1

Stoic

Counter

Immovable Breath

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

Aura Smite: Shield-based attack with a high probability of delivering a critical hit. Attack power increases with shield's defensive strength, including temporary improvements.

(Prerequisites: Aura Shield, Shield Slam)

Breaching Charge: Helps user break through walls by ramming them with a shield. Can destroy enemy armor when the user's shield is harder. (Prerequisite: Shield Slam)

Guardian's Task: Converts and accumulates reduced damage from successfully blocked attacks to power a Defense Barrier Aura which can be applied to any designated party member or the user. Cannot be used in rapid succession. (Prerequisite: Wide Stance)

Forced Breakthrough: Allows user to send an enemy flying when rammed with a shield. Delays enemy attacks within a certain area for a split second. (Prerequisite: Suppressing March)

Level 2 Skills

Riot Guard: Inflicts substantial knockback on enemy whenever an attack is successfully defended and reduces enemy speed.

Interception Prep: Instigates enemy attack while inflicting damage that increases accordingly with the number of people who counterattack.

Man-to-Man 1: Allows user to gain experience by training with a specified party member in town. (Prerequisite: Training Method 1)

Training Method 2: Increases experience gained by party actions that involve muscle power. (Prerequisite: Training Method 1)

Submission 2: Drastically decreases attack power of Bound enemies. Can only be activated when no armor is equipped. (Prerequisite: Submission 1)

Ground Seeker: Increases scouting capabilities when user is in a

prone position and reduces chance of detection.

Medicinal Herb Theory 2: Increases potency of medicinal plant and herb compounds. Increases raw material generation efficiency.
(Prerequisite: Medicinal Herb Theory 1)

Heavy Armor Tips 2: Bolsters attributes of equipped heavy defensive armor. (Prerequisite: Heavy Armor Tips 1)

Side Arm: Allows user to equip short swords or other supplemental weapons.

Level 1 Skills

Submission 1: Allows user to put enemy in Bind status with martial arts. Can only be activated when no armor is equipped.

Iron Head: Inflicts Stun status with a headbutt.

Shock Absorber 1: Reduces impact of shock-attribute attacks.

Troop Leader: Party members will not lose sight of the user until they reach their destination.

Delayed Retreat: Allows user to act as bait when retreating and delay pursuant enemy attacks.

Minesweeper 1: Occasionally detects traps embedded in the ground.

Heavy Armor Tips 1: Slightly accentuates attributes of equipped heavy defensive armor.

Patriot: When traveling with a vehicle, user can prioritize predicting incoming attacks and prioritize activating skills to counter or defend.

Remaining Skill Points: 8

She'd picked up quite a few skills suited for blocking enemy attacks on the front lines, but I saw a number that could even further bolster her defenses that she'd left untouched.

"Can I assume you didn't choose these Heavy Arms Tips skills to try to save points for something else? Your battle gear is always quite heavy, so I imagine

they would prove very useful to you.”

“Soon after I arrived in the Labyrinth Country...when I grew to level two, I decided against Heavy Armor Tips 1 in favor of Medicinal Herb Theory so I could quickly return to battle even if I sustained a wound,” she explained. “But...ever since I secured the funds to purchase potions, I haven’t had much use for it.”

Everyone could relate to the nagging feeling you chose the wrong one of two options. Even I had left some skills unused despite the useful advantages they seemed to promise.

“I also believed it would be ideal to strengthen my own body so I could defend myself and others without having to rely on a skill...”

“I see; that does make sense. If you can train your body and your mind in defense, you can also save skill points that way. I do also think adding this to an already strong physical foundation could be helpful, though... This Medicinal Herb Theory—does it help you identify which plants you can use for medicines?”

“Yes. Medicinal Herb Theory 1 only applies to beginner-level plants, but I do from time to time come across them in a labyrinth. However, I thought perhaps this time I might choose some skills that could assist with our upcoming operations...”

If these skills reflect both Seraphina’s occupation as a Riot Soldier and her own personal qualities, then I can see how she would have options apart from defensive skills, like those related to Training. She’s got Man-to-Man and Training Method... I guess she must have a proclivity for instructor positions as well.

Ryouko was similarly a Swimming Instructor, so I could see how Seraphina’s personality would also be suited for a teaching role. And while I hadn’t gotten a chance to study the Four Seasons’ members’ skill rosters, I had no doubt they faced the same concerns we did about choosing the right options.

“I think it’d be a good idea to take both Heavy Arms Tips 1 and 2 first. They should continuously raise your defenses, and I can’t think of many situations where they’d put you at a disadvantage.”

“Understood. I’ll use three skill points and acquire both of them.”

“Medicinal Herb Theory 2 does sound incredibly promising as well, so it’s a tough call...but maybe it’s better to choose a defensive measure we could keep up our sleeves, as you kindly suggested. Would you mind prioritizing a skill of that nature?”

“Not at all. And no need for the ‘kindly suggested’ formalities. Please, be at ease.”

Clearly, I was struggling to adjust to the change in our relationship. I felt honored she asked to speak with me on the same level, though, so I’d have to find a way to get used to it.

“This Submission looks useful for stopping enemies as they approach. Do you have a background in martial arts?”

“Yes, I took some classes in my previous life. We also learned it as part of the Guild Saviors training regiment, and I’ve engaged in a few real fights as well.”

So not only had Seraphina mastered the art of the shield, but she could also hold her own unarmed—a talent of unparalleled importance for those in the military or bodyguards. Still, it’s never too late to learn martial arts, so I could see how complete beginners might also develop great proficiency.

“I determined those skills unnecessary since I could not foresee abandoning my shield for any reason, and so I left them untouched. Do you believe they will assist in our battle against the Simian Lord?”

“It’s possible. I imagine judo joint-locking techniques, for example, will work to a certain degree against any monster who has them...but there is a risk they won’t work, and it is, of course, dangerous to get close to an enemy without your shield.”

She could theoretically combine Forced Breakthrough with Submission 1, but that would mean she’d have to set her shield down after the charge. Even if the rest of us backed her up, the idea of her putting or throwing her shield away mere feet or inches from an enemy was not realistic.

“You could also consider using Heavy Armor Tips 1 to raise your shield’s base defenses, then follow up with Aura Smite to increase your attack power. Still, I

think it makes the most sense to have defensive and attack roles separate when possible.”

“Then perhaps I should take Guardian’s Task? This should allow me to reduce the risk of injury to Ms. Elitia when she closes in on an enemy. Depending on the situation, I could also apply the Defensive Barrier Aura to myself if necessary.”

“Breaching Charge and a few of these other skills look quite promising, too, as options you could acquire during battle... That said, I don’t expect we’ll have much time to think in the heat of it. This really is a difficult decision.”

Breaching Charge would let her ram her shield through a wall—of which fortresses famously had many. But at this point, we had too little information to determine if busting through walls would be a useful battle tactic. We could also use Queen’s Tail to the same effect, though if possible, I wanted to save that for the Simian Lord itself.

“In that case, I shall familiarize myself with my available skills and take whichever become necessary during our expeditions.”

“That would be great, thank you. I may also ask you to acquire a specific one, too.”

“Understood. I see no significant shortcomings in the state of our battle cooperation and communication, so for now, I shall focus on ensuring my actions lessen the burden you have to bear.”

With that, Seraphina held out her right hand—to reassure me that she valued our continued partnership, perhaps? I shook hers in return and was surprised to find it far more slender than it had ever seemed under her gauntlets. Even so, the strength came through so clearly, I could tell I’d easily lose to her in an arm wrestle.

“May I ask you one more question?” I said.

“Yes, of course.”

“What does this Stoic do...?”

It had stood out to me when I looked through her skills, but I hesitated to ask

as I got the feeling it might lead the conversation off course. As she tightly clenched her hands where they lay on her lap, a blush slowly warmed her face.

“Ah...! Never mind, I was just a little curious. Sorry to pry.”

“...When I first came to the Labyrinth Country, I felt like I was groping in the dark much of the time...,” she began haltingly. “I want to believe it continues to serve me even now, but it does make me reflect on the immaturity that led me to take something which is essentially a prayer to the gods.” Then, after wavering for a brief moment, Seraphina toggled to the right screen on her license and showed it to me.

◆Skill Display—SERAPHINA◆

Stoic: When user practices an ascetic lifestyle, skill increases all stats and reduces the likelihood user will be hit with a status ailment.

“I had no idea such a thing existed... So this must be why you don’t drink alcohol.”

“To be honest, I cannot say for certain what counts as an ascetic lifestyle. However, I do seem to resist status ailments and have always enjoyed good health.”

I imagined an ascetic lifestyle could involve more than restraining from indulging in luxuries like alcohol, but didn’t feel it was my place to press any further.

“.....”

Though silent, Theresia began to blush slightly as well—perhaps even she saw how this could apply to more private matters? For some reason, I suddenly felt devastatingly mortified.

“...I believe this skill would suit you better than I, Mr. Arihito.”

“Huh...?”

“N-never mind... Well then, I’ll go see who’s next. If you’ll excuse me.”

She stood up and left the room. If Seraphina intentionally abstained from drinking or other luxuries to activate Stoic, then did that mean she actually

enjoyed them? Now that I came to think of it, we'd fought side by side several times, but I knew almost nothing about her personally.

The Labyrinth Country did have some entertainment districts, but I wondered how other parties handled this aspect of their lives. As a man among a party of women, I never wanted to do anything to threaten their trust in me. I might have a drink every once in a while, but I couldn't imagine myself going out alone at night.

"...Good evening."

"Hi, Igarashi. Shall we get started...?" I asked, getting up to greet her. Igarashi sat down across from me, seeming somehow restless.

"A-ahem. Atobe, did I hear correctly? It sounded like Seraphina was calling you something different than before..."

"Yes, she said she wanted me to feel more at ease with her now that she officially joined our party."

"I—I see... But you've never been standoffish toward her or anyone."

"Umm... This is just how I took it, but I think she meant it would be easier to work together if we could interact more frankly."

"O-oh, of course, I know what she meant," she stammered. "But maybe friendly would be better than frank in this case. Yes, I'm sure of it." Her arms crossed, Igarashi didn't even glance at me once while she spoke. I looked over to Theresia, who also tilted her head quizzically, apparently as equally confused as me.

"...We're all a party, so we have to get along, or...you know, treat everyone equally? So, you know, it's a bit late in the game for me to say so, but, you know..." Igarashi whispered, peeking over at me every few words. For some reason it felt like she was rebuking me, or ever-so-lightly threatening me, or who knows what.

"....."

I can't keep looking to Theresia for a lifeline for every little thing.

But that same moment, I finally realized what Igarashi was trying to say. It

took me far too long and made me wonder how dense, or tactless, I could be. Still, there was no way I'd be able to muster the courage to shift things between us and say something like, "We've been together for quite a while now, too. How about we also take a frank approach and call each other by our first names?" Even now, I still had to catch myself from calling her "Boss," especially when I was more at ease. They say tigers can't change their stripes overnight, but not even reincarnation had managed to shake me out of the habit of respectfully addressing her as my superior.

All jokes aside, I recognized this could destroy the relationship I'd built with her. But she'd just been muttering about treating "everyone equally." Surely she wouldn't get mad at me for using her first name. At least, I really hoped not.

"U-umm, Kyou—"

"...Ah! S-sorry, I shouldn't have gone off in front of Theresia like that... We should really focus on the important decisions I have to make about my skills," she interrupted, stopping me in my tracks—just when I had worked up the courage, too. "...? What's wrong, Atobe? Were you trying to say something?"

"No, it's fine. I just wanted to thank you again for all you did today, Igarashi."

"I should be thanking you. We went to a rather large bathhouse, and they had bubble baths and electrically warmed tubs, and even ones with medicinal herbs in the water. They had a sand bath back in District Seven, so I suppose each district must have its own special touches."

"I'd like to try that out myself."

Next time, after we defeated the Simian Lord, maybe Theresia could join them, too.

While the possibility we could grow in level again before our battle with the evil ape did remain, we definitely couldn't count on it. Instead, we had to make the most of all the skill points currently at our disposal. Igarashi seemed to agree; she'd tied her hair back for once, and for the first time in a long while, I saw her face snap into Igarashi Boss mode.

"*Phew...* It's kind of hot in here. Do districts with more deserts take on some of that weather?" she wondered, tugging at the neck of her blouse and flapping

it up and down in what appeared to be a candid gesture, though I'd have been more than honored if her doing so meant she felt comfortable around me. Nevertheless, I had to stop my eyes from drifting to her deep cleavage, which I should have long ago grown accustomed to—and kicked myself hard for even considering it.

“What’s wrong, Atobe? Why are you looking at the ceiling...?” she asked, confused. “Ew, don’t tell me there’s a bug up there?”

“N-no, nothing like that. Sorry. I just had the urge to stretch my neck.”

“Really? If you’re tight from all the meetings, we can take a break before we begin.”

“I’m fine, thank you. Sorry to worry you.”

“Then if you insist,” she said, and showed me her license.

Knowing I'd be dancing with the devil if I let her bend down to give me a better look, I reached out and took it before she could.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

Windmill: Rapidly spins a spear to attack enemies within range. Inflicts more hits per enemy when fewer are present. (Prerequisite: Spinning Spear)

Level 2 Skills

Spinning Spear: Increases damage when attacking by spinning your spear.

Brave Song: Raises all party members' attack strength and morale. Releases allies from Fear status ailment. (Prerequisite: Mist of Bravery)

Lancer's Protection: Enemy's piercing attacks are nullified when skill is activated.

Throw 2: Increases the distance, power, and accuracy of thrown spear attacks. Allows user to benefit from Piercing Strikes.

(Prerequisite: Throw 1)

Earth Puppet: Draws power from earthen sprites to create an autonomous golem. The golem cannot attack and relies on the user for stamina and defensive capabilities. (Prerequisite: Decoy)

Einherjar: Reduces hostility in immobilized targets and allows the user to recruit them once they regain mobility. Applicable only on humanoid targets. Success rate depends on the difference in stats between the user and the target.

Pole Dance: Can be activated only when a long-handled weapon is equipped. Temporarily increases agility and evasion rate. Allows user to occasionally charm enemies when dodging attacks. Cannot be used in succession. (Prerequisite: Dance of the Warrior Maiden 1)

Level 1 Skills

Dance of the Warrior Maiden 1: Slight chance of canceling an attack from an enemy of the opposite sex.

Piercing Strike 1: A portion of your attack penetrates the target's defense when you're equipped with a spear.

Freezing Thorns: Freezes opponent's legs and slows their movement.

Bulletproof 1: Enemy long-ranged attacks are slightly less likely to hit.

Throw 1: Attacks by throwing a spear. Increased hit rate compared to normal throwing attack.

Freezing Weapon 1: Temporarily adds Frozen attribute to a weapon.

Seishin Stance: Nullifies status ailments that affect concentration with a fixed probability of success. Ensures the next attack will be a critical hit only once.

Remaining Skill Points: 3

A quick scan revealed a surprising variety of skills, a mix of those drawn from the Valkyrie occupation and others from Igarashi's personality. Seishin Stance probably came from naginata, a Japanese polearm with a curved blade at the end. At one skill point, it was a steal, though we'd only discover its true value during a crisis. There seemed to be no reason not to take the skill, considering the impact it could have if she used it in combination with a weapon of the spear variety, like the Forbidden Scythe, which was capable of defeating an enemy in a single strike during times of crisis, or one of the long-handled weapons Valkyries apparently excelled in. That is, no reason except for the limited points we had to work with. Seishin Stance cost only one point, but even so we had to think very carefully before deciding to spend it.

"Oh, I can get a level-three skill now," Igarashi noted excitedly. "...It looks powerful, but if I take that, I'll be completely out of points."

"It does look quite powerful. If you can get more than five hits out of Windmill, I expect it'll make a huge impact on a single enemy."

"Windmill, like those things powered by water or wind...? I get the feeling it's probably a pretty showy attack. I'd need to get Spinning Spear first, though, so I'll have to hold off on it for now. What can I get with the points I have...?"

Though Igarashi most likely didn't realize it, she was pushing her breasts up with her hand as she leaned forward, as if they were too heavy on their own—no doubt the daggers I felt Theresia staring at me were not just my imagination.

"...Atobe, are you eyeing this one? Pole Dance? I mean, really. Sure, I was in the dance and naginata clubs in college, but I never did anything like that."

"O-oh, no, I wasn't expecting you to take that at all..."

"You make it sound like you don't expect anything from me! Just kidding. The description does make it sound like a good tool to have for our next big battle. If I could charm the Seekers under the Simian Lord's control, maybe we wouldn't have to fight them."

"If you're looking for a way to avoid fighting the captive Seekers...this Einherjar seems promising. The conditions it needs to work are tough to meet, but it looks very useful. Plus, I imagine actual humans count as 'humanoid targets.'"

Not all bipedal monsters could be categorized as humanoids, meaning the Simian Lord or its orcs were probably out, but real humans and demi-humans definitely fit the bill. Skills like this that were effective only in specific situations lacked versatility and might not see much use. I expected it could come in handy this time around, but Igarashi had other powerful skills available that made the choice a tricky one.

In preparation for battle with powerful opponents like the Simian Lord, were we better off prioritizing ways to instantly increase all our members' attack capabilities, or methods to avoid battle and rescue the Seekers it held captive? It would all come to nothing if we couldn't defeat our main foe, so you could say both focuses held equal weight.

Earth Puppet seemed helpful as a decoy to lure enemy attacks, but we should probably hold off on that one for the time being. Maybe I ought to assign everyone specific roles that we can refine as we continue seeking and then go up against the Simian Lord once we're ready.

But any decision I make now might very well have a crucial impact down the line. We can't afford to make any mistakes, so maybe it's best to forgo taking any skills while we still have time? Igarashi could still grow in level, too. Oh, but there is one skill she should definitely acquire.

After careful consideration, I pointed to the last skill on the list. "I think there's a chance this Seishin Stance could work with my Morale Discharge, like Wolf Pack."

"Your Morale Discharge...," Igarashi said. "I checked my license after the battle, but that's the one that makes all of our skills that bump up our individual capabilities apply to everyone in the party, right?"

"Exactly. I would have to get injured first to activate my Morale Discharge, but I imagine that bar won't be too difficult to meet in the heat of a vicious battle..."

Igarashi glanced up as I spoke and looked me straight in the eye—her gaze looked angry yet not, but the reproach in her expression came through very clearly.

"One day, one of us might find a skill that can raise your morale like you lift ours, or maybe we'll discover some other method," she said to me. "Either way,

once we do, I'll never let you talk about getting hurt as if you're just collateral damage we can't avoid."

"S-sorry... But collateral damage, huh? Never thought anyone would describe me with the kind of phrase you'd hear in a movie."

"Oh, please... You've already made it through tons of cinematic scrapes, you know. The only difference is, unlike in a movie, our actions are what decide whether we survive."

Above all else, we had to make it out alive, save Rury, and lift the hex off Theresia. Still, I couldn't easily shake the nagging thought there might be other Seekers out there like Elitia, who were frozen at the loss of a dear friend, or the hope that we might be able to save them, too.

"...Our overall strategy is obviously important, but I've also decided I want to take any skills that could help protect you. I'll bet the girls all feel the same way."

"Igarashi..." I was at a loss for words. "Thank you."

"...Oh, b-but, umm... I'm not saying that out of any *personal* feelings toward you, okay? You're the center of our party, so I just thought I should keep you as my main focus when it comes to skills... It's, you know, from a risk control perspective, that's the best move," she hurried to say to hide her embarrassment.

Then, realizing how flushed her face had become, she cleared her throat with an *ahem*, got up, and went around to lean against the back of the couch.

"S-so...what's your verdict? I do have quite a lot of options; maybe I should hold off for now?"

"Looking closely, there's one skill that raises both attack capabilities and morale, isn't there? Brave Song."

"Ah...sorry, I missed that one."

"That said, while increased attack power is definitely appealing, I can take care of raising the party's morale, and we can only use Morale Discharge once per expedition, so it's hard to justify using two skill points on that."

“All right. Perhaps I should consider taking Einherjar, then?”

“Yes. But for now, I think it’s best if you acquire either Seishin Stance or Bulletproof 1.”

“Huh...?”

Apparently the Bulletproof 1 suggestion took Igarashi off guard.

“You don’t shy away from possibly making yourself collateral damage, either, when the going gets tough, you know. I’d like you to take some skills that can help bolster your own defenses, too.”

“...S-so, you *were* mad about that...?” she said.

Igarashi had risked her own safety to save us with her Ambivalenz, a powerful but double-edged weapon in that it also inflicted damage on her. The experience made it impossible for me to disregard one important lesson: Igarashi could absolutely sacrifice herself for our party. And I couldn’t expect her to get safely out of every situation that pushed her to make that kind of choice.

“I have no right to be so presumptuous and get angry at you. I’m just concerned about you, the same way you worried about me. That’s all I meant.”

“...Sorry... A-actually—should I say thank you instead?”

Personally, I didn’t need either—in fact, *I* wanted to thank *her*. But it seemed like she still hadn’t let go of the guilt she felt for the way she’d treated me as my boss, and it made me feel a little hesitant to open up to her completely. That’s why I’d tried my best to call her by her first name, but I wasn’t sure I had another try in me.

“I think Ambivalenz is a great trump card kind of weapon that’s powerful enough to take on even the monsters in District Five, but we need to prepare for all the risks that come with it if you do have to break it out.”

“Yes, I agree... If and when we have to pull out that trump card, I want to really make it count, and stay totally focused. In that sense, Seishin Stance can help with both those points. But I’m all right without Bulletproof. I’ve got other evasion skills already,” she said, and acquired Seishin Stance.

Then flashing Theresia and me a mischievous grin, she took down a cross spear hanging on the wall. Leaving the protective cloth wrapped around it, she readied the spear—her body lowered halfway to the ground, she held the handle with her left hand and raised her right high in the air. The blade on the spear faced downward, but she looked like nothing could get past her in that beautiful form.

“This is what the Seishin Stance is supposed to look like...,” she explained. “It’s odd; now that I have the skill, I get this indescribable sensation when I do it.”

“Well, it seems perfect to me. I suppose cross spears and naginata are not so different after all.”

Blushing with embarrassment, Igarashi hung the spear back on the wall. That was when Theresia, who hadn’t taken her eyes off the Valkyrie for a second, stood up. Just as I was wondering what she planned to do, she assumed an exact replica of Igarashi’s stance, minus the weapon.

“You really didn’t miss a thing, Theresia. Thanks for watching so closely,” Igarashi said appreciatively.

“.....” Theresia nodded silently, then lowered herself back down onto the sofa. Evidently, she’d decided she didn’t need to stand to protect me and had adopted the seat as her new station from which she’d watch over me during these meetings.



Up next came Misaki and Suzuna. I’d kept them waiting a long time and worried they might’ve gotten sleepy, but both still bounded with energy.

“*Haaah*, Arihitooo, how are you sooo good at keeping your hands to yourself? I don’t know how anyone couldn’t not control themselves in front of a steamy, fresh-outta-the-bath Kyouka.”

“Wait, that means they can stay in control, right?”

“Ah, caught that? You know, you may always look calm and collected on the outside, but you’re *such* a wicked tease!”

“I-I’m sorry, Arihito, Misaki’s been so excited for her turn...”

Suzuna apologized, her hands full with Misaki and her unbridled energy. But I had a hunch as to why our in-house Gambler was bouncing off the walls.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if some of that energy rubbed off on Elitia. Actually, I might be shocked if it didn’t... But who knows?”

“Aw, don’t give me a *who knows*! Of *course* my very presence lifts her spirits! It’s not like I’m trying extra hard or anything, though. I’m just always like this.”

“Ha-ha-ha... No argument there.”

“Ohhh, I see how it is. I see you laughing! Is it just me, or did you wake up and choose to bully your poor Gambler today?” I’d never dream of it, of course, but Misaki always joked like that, and I wouldn’t have changed her humor for the world.

Through all this, Suzuna stood one step removed from the action, a literal pillar of emotional support for her peers Misaki and Elitia—actually, I felt guilty admitting it, but her quiet fortitude gave me, a fully grown man, great comfort as well.

“Arihito, we’ve all looked through the skills we have available and have given some thought as to which we want to choose,” Suzuna informed me.

“That’s great. I’ll try my best to take that into consideration.”

“All right, why don’t you go ahead first, Suzu?” Misaki suggested. “Don’t mind me, I’ll just wait here like a reality TV cameraman until you ask for my opinion.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t. I’m a little camera shy, you know.”

“Ho-ho! I gotta say, your uber-calm comebacks are growing on me.”

Grinning at Misaki’s joke, Suzuna handed me her license.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 2 Skills

Exorcism 2: Effective against undead-type monsters. (Prerequisite: Exorcism 1)

Dance of the Shrine Maiden: Draws target’s attention with a dance.

Increases dodge rate.

Soul Siren: Calls a designated person's spirit closer. Can only be used when the person's spirit is separated from the body.

Spiritual Dwelling: Moves a specified party member's soul into another person's body. (Prerequisite: Medium)

Shinto Prayer: Creates protective barrier for all party members that reduces damage from undead enemy attacks.

Purge: Reduces the effect of status ailments that constrain movement or, when activated in advance, prevents them from taking effect. (Prerequisite: Exorcism 1)

Level 1 Skills

High-Angle Shot: Fires an arrow upward to strike the enemy at the end of the arrow's arched trajectory.

Exorcism Arrow: Adds HOLY attribute to arrows when using a bow.

Cleansing: Adds HOLY attribute to whoever is in a body of water with you.

Prayer: Party's success rate increases slightly.

Oracle: Allows user to receive divine revelation when party is receiving a god's graces. Revelations will vary between gods. Cannot be used in succession.

Remaining Skill Points: 3

Suzuna looked over at Theresia apologetically. "I had hoped as a Shrine Maiden I would have access to skills that could lift the curse on Theresia, but... maybe they're just not available yet at my level? Or do you think perhaps people in my line of work can't undo hexes at all?"

"I think there must be a specialist occupation that can remove curses, or at least, that's what Ceres said... But Suzuna, you have a role only you can play. Let's try to keep that in mind and stay positive."

"Okay... Thank you, Arihito." My heart welled with appreciation for Suzuna for

even hoping she might be able to help Theresia out of this mess.

“It’s no fair. Suzu’s got all the cool skills. They all do something amazing,” Misaki complained in jest. “But I gotta say, I *really* don’t wanna run into any of those ‘undead-type monsters.’ Sounds like something straight out of a zombie movie.”

“That’s true. Suzuna’s Sacred Words skill was what allowed us to defeat the Merciless Guillotine, after all. I think you could easily become an undead monster expert depending on what skills you take, but there are lots of other great options here so it’s probably best to keep a good balance.”

I couldn’t help wondering what kind of level-3 skills would show up for Suzuna. For this meeting in particular, I really wished she had grown one more level.

“Would it be okay if I acquired this Oracle skill?” Suzuna asked. “Ariadne is our guardian deity, so I’d like to prepare myself as a Shrine Maiden to receive any divine revelations she has for us.”

“D’you think this is different than just talking to her like normal?” Misaki wondered.

I had a feeling it was; skills like Oracle and Medium would probably have different effects, but as usual, we wouldn’t know until we tested them out. Maybe if Suzuna activated Medium now, I could ask Ariadne directly—I thought, then noticed a mysterious blush had bloomed on Suzuna’s cheeks.

“What’s wrong, Suzu? Too hot? You’re, like, beet red up to your ears!”

“N-no, that’s not... Arihito, I’m going to leave two skill points so I can take anything we end up needing in the moment, okay? I need to step out for a bit of air.”

“R-right. Thanks, Suzuna.”

Suzuna got up and left while Misaki watched on, a quizzical expression on her face. The Shrine Maiden had cracked a smile at Misaki, though, so I could be fairly certain she wasn’t angry. I didn’t worry about her wandering around town late at night, either, as she seemed headed only for the balcony attached to their shared bedroom.

“It’s gettin’ hottt in this meeting, huh? Must be all that passion you’re packing, Ari-*heat*-o.”

“Pretty sure that’s not it. Oh, but...I think she might’ve remembered the favor I asked her the other day.”

“F-favor? You asked Suzuna a favor—in private...? So, like...”

I could almost see Misaki’s mind racing toward outlandish assumptions. The truth was nothing to be ashamed of, though, so I saw no harm in filling Misaki in.

“We need to raise our devotion levels to Ariadne if we want to rely on her strength, right? So I asked Suzuna if she wouldn’t mind acting as a medium for me to speak with Ariadne... That said, we’ve only done it once, so it’s not such a huge deal. Wh-what?”

“Oh, Suzu, I had no idea you two had gone so far... Not that it bothers me, of course. Nothing makes me happier than seeing my friends happy, all right?!”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. I just asked her to turn her back to me so I could activate the skill.”

“Eeep! Do you even *hear* yourself?! Have you been keeping a secret back fetish under lock and key this whole time?! Now I’m getting all self-conscious—I don’t even know what mine looks like!”

“.....”

After quietly watching that exchange, Theresia slid her hand behind her to touch her own back—was she getting nervous about hers, too? From what I’d seen, she had pure, white skin, free from any lizardman scales.

“Don’t worry, Theresia, you’re fine,” I assured her. “As for you, Misaki, reel it in on the jokes, okay?”

“.....”

“All riiight.” She relented. “But I gotta say, I’m totally into how you said that just now. You sounded like a teacher! Well, Mr. Arihito, these are the skills I’ve got to work with. Kindly share your advice with your dear student, Teach!”

Ibuki called me “Teacher,” too. Maybe my suit makes me look the part?

Misaki had finally gotten down to business, so I shook any musings out of my head and took a look at her license before she got distracted yet again.

Part IV: Traces of a Hex

Something seemed to occur to Misaki from her seat across from me; she got up and came to sit at my side.

“It’s easier to see this way,” she said by way of explanation. “Hee-hee. Don’t think I’ve got ulterior motives, okay?”

The mischievously happy grin on her face made that hard to believe, but I let it slide.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 2 Skills

Extra Turn: Takes one action on behalf of the indicated party member.

Pool Cap: Can reduce damage from a fatal monster attack on the indicated target to keep them just able to fight. User takes half of the reduced damage instead. Can only be used once per expedition.

Level 1 Skills

Russian Roulette 1: Chooses a random target among both allies and enemies and halves their vitality.

Poker Face: Renders facial expressions unreadable.

Lucky Guess 1: Allows you to vaguely sense which action will lead to good results.

Coin Toss: Increases luck if the coin lands on the face chosen by an ally.

Small Bet: Divides user’s vitality and magic among others during battle. Recovers twice the given amount when the battle ends.

Double Draw: Doubles attacks made with card-type weapons.

Gambit: When a coin toss lands on tails at the beginning of a battle, the enemy will strike first but will be limited to attacks without attributes. (Prerequisite: Coin Toss)

Big Lotto: Increases chances of finding rare items when gathering resources in a labyrinth.

Remaining Skill Points: 3

"Haaah..." Misaki sighed. "I thought really hard about which of these to choose, too, I swear. But they're all so tricky, I just can't make up my mind."

"This list drives home just how fascinating the Gambler job is. Practically all these skills are irreplaceable."

"D'aaaw. Oh, stop, stop, all that praise is just gonna go to my head! But do go on," she said, then bent her head down a little toward me.

Ah, she wants me to pet her.

Part of me felt I shouldn't encourage this behavior, but I did give her a quick *pat, pat*.

"Hahhh..." You've got such a soooft touch. But why'd you stop so soon?"

"W-well, I'm not exactly used to it..."

"With *me* maybe. Right, Theresia?"

"....." Without taking her eyes off us, Theresia lightly rested her hand on top of her lizard mask. Somehow the message got through to me, and I started to feel a little embarrassed myself.

"Ahem..." Getting back on track." I steered us back to the task at hand. "Misaki, which of these skills do you think you absolutely need?"

"It's tough to say, since I feel like I haven't really made full use of the ones I've already got. Sometimes I'll be, like, 'Ah, I should've used *that one!*' after the fact. Like, Magic Number. I'm glad I took it, but I haven't even used it once yet."

"I mean, it is kind of a parlor trick...and there are only so many instances when you can order your friends to do something."

Seemed like Misaki had thought things over after our expeditions and found

some areas for improvement on her own.

Most of her skills never hurt to use, and some combinations like Dice Trick and Lucky Seven 1 were guaranteed to provide some benefit. She'd probably get some later on that had to do with the roll of the dice again, but for the moment, those seemed out of reach. Every available skill had potential uses depending on the situation, but even one like Pool Cap, which could come in handy in a dire spot, wasn't an easy choice as it would hurt Misaki to activate.

"Gambit... This one looks pretty useful. Oh, but you'd need Coin Toss first, and the enemy could still end up attacking first anyway."

"Seems like something that'd be *perfecto* for a certain kind of *momento*, right? But, like, I can totally see why it's two points... Wait, how crazy is this Pool Cap?" Tapping the skill, Misaki went to acquire it, then chuckled a little grimly and stopped. "It's kinda hard to keep my cool when you're looking at me so seriously..."

"That skill could save one of our party members if they're hit with a fatal wound, but...I think it'd take a toll on you, too."

The skill could cut an attack that stole all of someone's vitality, then take half of that damage from Misaki. The only problem—if the injured person had much more vitality than her, it could put Misaki's life in danger.

"Y'know, it's been a pretty smooth ride for me so far. I mean, apart from *immediately* losing my cool whenever we all get caught up in something wild. But...back in District Eight, when you got stabbed by that stupid eagle warrior's feather, I remember just wishing I could've taken half the pain for you. Maybe that's why this skill's popped up now...you know, maybe. I don't know."

"...I know you're a Gambler, but you don't have to bet your own safety, you know."

"Hmph! Well, I wanna help protect you, too, I'll have you know! Or so she says, then secretly stashes all her skill points away...", she joked, but I could tell that even if she did leave the points unused now, she'd probably take Pool Cap if one of us was in danger.

"Emergency-use skills are great, but I think you might want to look at some

that are more versatile.”

“Verse-uh-tie-all?”

“Something that has a lot of different everyday uses,” I explained, then wrote the word out with my finger on the table. “Ohhh,” she gasped, and clapped her hands together in understanding. She’d probably heard the word before, but we all have moments where something won’t come to us immediately.

“Versatile, versatile...,” she murmured. “Oh, then doesn’t this one look good? Big Lotto.”

“Lotto, if I’m not mistaken, is a lottery. So this skill improves your luck when searching for resources, huh? You’re right; that does look useful.”

“Maybe it’s just me getting these vibes, but doesn’t this remind you of those piggies that hunt for truffles?”

“I get the feeling it’s probably less about smelling them out and more sensing out an area richer in resources, no?”

“Ooooh,” she marveled, but I was just making an educated guess. I couldn’t promise I was right.

“I was thinking we should try to find some Sterling Silver Sand in the next few days to beef up our equipment, so this Big Lotto might come in handy,” I said.

“Okayyy, on it. Aaand, go!” She tapped her license to acquire the skill. “...*Sniff, sniff*. Smells like treasure!”

“Oof, a dad joke? Not sure what to say...”

Misaki leaned over me and started sniffing around my arms.

It doesn’t bother me if she smells me, but we might have an issue if someone sees us.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Theresia and I locked eyes.

“.....”

“Ooh, Theresia’s sizing you up like she wants to give you a sniff, too! Wanna let her have a go? C’mon, he’s all yours!”

“Do I have any other choice...? I get that you’re excited, Misaki, but try not to

go overboard,” I chided her, after which she promptly stuck her tongue out at me and got up.

“Are you not gonna have time to help Melissa with her skills tonight?”

“I’m going to go to the Repository to check on her later,” I said. “It’s best we go over everyone’s skills tonight.”

“One hundo bromundo! Good night!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Night.”

Sometimes I can’t help but think the minds of girls who come up with colorful slang must spin so much faster than mine. But I guess even thinking about it that way ages me—wait, this isn’t the time to be indulging in mixed emotions.

“.....”

Theresia stood up and looked like she was going to sit next to me on the sofa—but then for some reason she looped around the back and finally took a seat on the couch opposite me.

“Hmm? What’s wrong? Easier to talk face-to-face?”

She nodded. That was fine, but it had seemed like she’d first been about to come next to me. Maybe I’d just imagined it? So far, I hadn’t noticed any changes in her demeanor or health due to the hex. I knew worrying too much about it would burden her, but the thought never left the corner of my mind.

“All right... I’m going to take a look at your new skills.”

She nodded once more. Pulling up the screen on my license, I turned it to the side so we could both get a good look.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

× Lizard Skin 2: Inherent demi-human skill. Temporarily transforms user, greatly increasing resistance to attributes related to the individual’s characteristics. Allows user to activate unique skills only available while transformation lasts.

× Scapegoat: Switches target of any attack aimed at the user to someone else.

Level 2 Skills

Hidden Viper: Special demi-human skill. Allows user to bind target when attacking from a Hidden state.

Hide: Renders the user unnoticeable unless hit by an enemy's attack. (Prerequisite: Silent Step)

Pickpocket 2: Steals multiple specified items from target without their knowledge. (Prerequisite: Pickpocket 1)

Trap Detection 2: Gives user special trap-detecting vision. (Prerequisite: Trap Detection 1)

Antibody: Nullifies systemic status ailments due to poison or similar substances with a fixed probability of success. Temporarily augments user's attack power and speed.

Weapon Bite: Blocks enemy weapon attacks and steals weapon upon success.

Reverse End: Counterattack after a successful Dodge is guaranteed to hit with double intensity. (Prerequisite: Reverse Grip)

► Evil Domination: Automatically acquired when Etch-a-Hex takes full effect. User will leave current party and become subservient to the Hex caster. Progress Level: 3

Level 1 Skills

Pickpocket 1: Steals a specified item from target without their knowledge.

Escapology: Escapes even when restrained.

Reverse Grip: Increases chances of a critical hit when user strikes with a lightweight blade held in a backhand grip. Boosts attack power if two weapons are equipped.

Hijack: Steals loot or resources when an attack successfully hits a

fleeing enemy.

Remaining Skill Points: 3 (► 2)

“.....!”

Nothing could calm the anger that smoldered in my heart when I saw the look on Theresa’s face. The Shining Simian Lord’s hex had wormed its way into her skills, the most vital aspect of a Seeker’s life, and was slowly stealing Theresa’s freedom. I had felt a sort of relief that Theresa seemed unchanged from the outside; only after checking her license did I realize the awful truth.

“.....”

Careful not to touch Evil Domination, Theresa pointed to the level-3 skills that had X’s before them.

“I saw the same thing on Elitia’s skill display, too. Apparently, curses or hexes make certain skills off limits,” I explained.

Though she hadn’t taken her eyes off her license until that moment, Theresa then turned to me and nodded. Next, she pointed to Reverse Grip and Reverse End. She already had plenty of attack skills, and with these external restrictions on which new ones she could acquire, I would’ve thought there was no need to rush and choose another—even so, she wanted to lean into her role and augment her capabilities as an attacker for our party.

For a while, all my words caught in the back of my throat. Things like *Thank you*, or *I’m with you there, Theresa*, sounded like empty platitudes.

“.....”

“...Yeah. You already managed to sneak up on the Simian Lord once—after we get your Hide and Seek repaired, you can try again and go at it with Sneak Attack, then double the damage with Reverse Grip. You could also use the Butterfly Ring to activate Butterfly Frolic...”

Whenever Theresa acquired new weapons or skills, she always found ways to put them to good use. I didn’t need to give her any detailed instructions ahead of time; she figured it out on her own. I knew, but I had to say something, fully aware that this need reflected my own weakness.

“.....”

After nodding once again, she acquired both skills. She’d probably long ago decided she would do all she could to fulfill her duty.

If only she had access to skills that would protect her from the Simian Lord’s dangerous attacks, or give her a little more leeway in life-threatening moments, or use for defense. Such wishful thoughts repeated unceasingly in my mind.

“...They do say a great offense is the best defense, don’t they, Theresia?”

“.....”

The tiniest of smiles crossed her lips for the briefest second before it disappeared, perhaps repressed by her status as a demi-human.

“Last but not least—guess I’ve got to look at my own skills, huh? Want something to drink, Theresia?”

I figured she’d stay up as long as I did, no matter whether I told her to rest for the night. This time, though, she stayed still and did not nod. Taking that to mean she was okay, I decided to dive right in and see what I had available.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

〒 ✕ ○ ✕ 3: Details unknown.

Falcon Eyes: Further increases ability to monitor the situation from the back line and augments shooting attacks. Activates Overtime when user hits the enemy’s weak spot. (Prerequisite: Hawk Eyes)

Level 2 Skills

Back Slip: Temporarily increases user’s speed, allowing user to move first.

Back Order: Activates a skill with insufficient magic by taking a portion from your allies.

Doll Assist: Strengthens golems and similar pawns created by allies in front of user.

Backdoor: Provides a constant stream of intel on enemies whenever user is in retreat. (Prerequisite: Rear Stance)

Escape Anchor: Significantly increases swiftness when activating Rearguard General. (Prerequisite: Rearguard General)

Recovery Support 2: Applies healing effects on user to all party members in front. Recovers only vitality or magic. Can be activated once every thirty seconds. (Prerequisite: Recovery Support 1)

Morale Support 2: Gradually increases morale of party members in front of you. Increases party's maximum morale limit. (Prerequisite: Morale Support 1)

Level 1 Skills

Front Line Support 1: Inflicts knockback on enemy whenever allies in front of user sustain an attack.

Magic Support 1: Increases magic consumption and spell strength by 50 percent for party members in front.

Evasion Support 1: Occasionally activates Auto-Dodge for party members in front.

Summon Support 1: Summons a nearby party for rear support.

Rear View: Uses 5 magic points to expand your vision to cover your rear for a set period of time.

Pass Back: Passes an attack onto target behind you. Can only be used when there is an available target.

Backdraft: Automatically counters when attacked from behind.

Tactical Reload: Reloads bullet-shooting weapons quicker and recovers magic from last shot. Requirement: Must frequently use a magic-powered bullet-shooting weapon; must be of a particular occupation.

Remaining Skill Points: 4

Details unknown...? It's got a "3" next to it—can I assume that means what it

would for any other skill? Or is that just another corrupted piece of text...?

I had enough points to take it, but for the time being, I should probably stick to skills whose effects I know for sure. Falcon Eyes looked very tempting, but that didn't feel like an option since I didn't know what Overtime meant. If only we could test skills out before choosing them.

Tactile Reload seemed like it would give my attacks more bite and also replenish my magic during battle. Plus, if I combined that with Recovery Support 2, maybe I'd eliminate the risk of running out of magic in the middle of a fight.

Morale Support 2 probably shortened the time it took for us to max out on morale, and I'll bet there's some positive benefit from increasing the party limit. But we could already use Morale Support 1 to boost our morale well enough beforehand to prepare to use any discharges.

Magic Support 1 and Evasion Support 1 also looked pretty useful, as did some of the others—but I guess I could always choose from these many options as I needed to on the spot.

“.....”

“Hm...?”

I'd been so focused on my skills, I hadn't realized Theresia had disappeared. Wondering if she'd retreated to the corner of the room again, I turned around—and felt her hand on my shoulder.

“.....”

“...Sorry, I must've looked pretty scary, huh?” I said, assuming she'd moved to let me save face. But without carefully reading her every gesture, it was impossible to know what she was thinking.

“...I...”

Theresia's soft breath tickled the nape of my neck, though she hadn't blown on me or anything. She'd brought her face close in order to do something.

What if she took Misaki's joke literally? In that case, what she just did was—

“U-um, did I miss a spot in the bath...?”

“.....”

She said nothing. Normally, she'd run away about this point. But this time, even after I turned around to face her, she still stayed exactly where she stood. I could see the visible portion of her mouth moving beneath her mask, trying to form words, but no sound came out.

“.....!”

Suddenly, she started to panic and hung her head. What in the world could be causing her to slump like that, when she was always so headstrong, refusing to listen and stay behind when I went in for a bath? But I needed to express my own thoughts more clearly, too. I stood up, but Theresia still did not raise her head.

“You don't have to apologize. And don't hold yourself back.”

“.....”

She didn't move right away. Nervously, very nervously, she lifted her chin, then placed her hand on her own heart.

When I reached out and petted the top of her lizard mask, she seemed to suddenly remember something and blushed bright red. But she didn't move except to lower the hand she had over her heart and reach for my shirt. Holding on to it, she looked up at me. I pulled my hand away, but hers retained its grip.

“You need to get a good rest tonight, Theresia. I'll keep watch, don't worry.”

“.....!”

She shook her head. I was almost positive she would've sacrificed some of her sleep to stand guard as she always did if I hadn't said anything.

“I may not look it, but I'm a pro at pulling all-nighters. Man, how pathetic would I look if I fell asleep on the job?”

“.....”

Once more, her lips curled up into a faint smile. This time, though, it stuck around.

Our party sorely lacked a professional healer. Recovery Support and potions

could go only so far—and leaving this problem unattended would definitely not fly. We'd already experienced the dangers of this firsthand when Suzuna's magic ran dry and almost put her out of commission.

I decided I had to take Recovery Support 2 and Tactile Reload. If I didn't grow any more in level before our next date with the Simian Lord, I'd have only one skill point left to use in the heat of the moment.

“.....”

“...Theresia, think you can let me go?” I asked softly; she still hadn't released her hold on my shirt. She let go—only to immediately grab my arm and sit me back down on the sofa.

“.....”

Then she started massaging my shoulders, squeezing and releasing. Her form was a bit strange, but that also made it relaxing. I felt her come as close as she'd been a moment earlier. Was this also Misaki's influence, or had she always wanted to do this? I wasn't sure but felt it would be rude to say anything either way and decided to sit still for a little while longer.

Part V: Yearning

Hoping to review all my party members' skills before the day ended, I headed to the Repository. I left the lodging and walked to a small stone teleportation shed nearby then ducked inside. The teleportation door within took us to either the Repository or Monster Ranch, with which our party had contracts, depending on which key I used.

"All right... Let's go."

A faint light illuminated the door as I brought my key close to a crystal embedded on it. Then the words *Repository 5583* formed on the surface, perhaps signaling my destination. I stepped through the threshold and into another dimension, just like when we asked Falma to open a treasure chest for us. I wasn't exactly sure why, but cold air had been set to flow through and fill the Repository. Melissa had probably bundled up to protect herself from the chill.

I heard a *clang, clang* coming from the back of the room—late as the hour had grown, our Butcher was apparently still hard at work. The room was dim and without a lamp or candle in sight, but slowly my eyes grew accustomed to the low light. A large magic circle was inscribed on the floor beneath my feet. This must've been where people got transported after using a key to their Repository.

Lifting my head as the thought occurred to me, I almost screamed. Farther into the room, I could just barely make out an enormous—half-dissected—scorpion with a white exoskeleton suspended in a huge mass of ice, as well as a bespectacled middle-aged man and young girl with fine, flaxen hair and the eyes of a wild lynx.

"My, if it isn't Mr. Arihito," Rikerton said. "I didn't expect you'd come down here so late."

"...Hello."

“H-hello... Wow, you’ve already made so much progress.”

“Oh yes. It’s extraordinarily hard, though, so we’re throwing all the skills and tools we have at it to first cut it up into manageable chunks. I borrowed a few tools made of ore only available in District Five for the job. Take this one here. It’s got a mysterious type of metal covering the blade,” he explained, and showed me something that resembled a chisel you might use for woodworking.

Since Melissa was holding a hammer, I assumed they were splitting the work, with Rikerton placing the chisel in the right spot and Melissa pounding it. I could almost hear them breathing in perfect unison—a real father-daughter team.

“...We have to process every piece of the exoskeleton to make it lighter. It’s too heavy for armor as is. Ceres asked me to take out the part that shoots laser beams. I put it here. This one’s too big, too. We’ll need something to carry it,” Melissa informed me, referring to the Queen Scorpion’s Afterglow that Ceres mentioned.

The Butchers had pried off the shell covering The Calamity’s chest and removed whatever lay within. Several wires made of some kind of organic material had been strung up; were these what we’d need to connect to The Calamity’s Stinger to make Queen’s Tail?

Alphecca can materialize for only so long, so we’ll have to come up with another solution for hauling this thing. Right now, I guess the cart Madoka has been asking for is our best bet.

We’d had Madoka join us on expeditions before as rear backup. Her Morale Discharge, Item Effects, was a powerful recovery ace in the hole, and I was considering asking her to come along on this next mission, too.

“Wow... Up close, this looks like some complex circuitry, doesn’t it?”

“Monsters with highly unique capabilities can sometimes have organs that are essentially magic tools. Some simply keep a magic stone within their bodies, but this Afterglow appears to work by connecting various such stones with an executive organ.”

“I see... So does that mean it’s possible to repurpose these parts as magic tools?”

“Theoretically, yes, though in reality, it’s just as difficult as relying on machines to replace the organic functions...so to speak. That said, we Butchers can pick up new skills related to magical tools, not only the dissecting itself, so we are always learning more.” After finishing the rather verbose explanation, Rikerton took off his glasses and wiped them with a cloth.

Evidently, he had a bit of a fanatic streak in him when it came to magic tools—not that I blamed him. I could talk for ages about things I loved, so I sympathized.

“...It can be hard to get a word in with my dad.”

“Ah, I beg your pardon. Somehow I got the sense you’d understand the romance and adventure behind magic tools, and I blathered far too long.”

“Not at all; I found that very interesting. By the way, Rikerton, is this part unusable?” I asked, referring to The Calamity’s head, which had been removed from the rest of the body. I was surprised to see no blood even after such a dramatic dissection; instead, an oily liquid dripped from the bust into a metal bucket the two had placed beneath it, perhaps so not even this would go to waste.

“Ohhh, that... Take a look at the monster’s forehead, if you would. You’ll see it’s covered with a membrane unlike the rest of the exoskeleton, but there appears to also be what looks like a magic stone embedded in there. If you’ll allow me, I can extract it now.”

“A magic stone...”

“...I sense something that reacts to the power of the Hidden Gods. In all likelihood, the embedded crystal is an Armament Controller,” I heard Murakumo mention.

After I asked Rikerton to go ahead, he carefully cut out the item—which turned out to be a stone about the size of my palm. He handed it to me, and it began to glow with a faint blue light—just as Murakumo had suspected, it seemed similar to an Alkaid or Alioth Crystal.

◆Merak Crystal◆

> Unknown application. No information to display.

> Cannot be appraised.

“Thank you so much for spotting this, Rikerton. This is an extremely valuable find for our party.”

“Well now, I’m mighty glad to hear it. Now that it’s out, it doesn’t appear to be a magic stone, does it...? I’ve never seen this kind of material before,” he noted. “Is this something you can use as is, without any processing?”

“Yes. As you can see, we have another one embedded in this blade...in Murakumo’s handle. They correspond to something very particular.”

“Now isn’t that something... A thrilling possibility, to be sure...,” he marveled.

I couldn’t help but wonder if his eyes used to sparkle with wonder much like this when he was a Seeker. A moment later, though, he snapped out of it with a smile and looked once again like the calm and collected artisan we knew.

“Well then,” Rikerton said, “I’m going to continue hacking away at The Calamity, and I’ll happily process any other monster resources you pick up while I remain in District Five. Melissa, it’s time you turn in and rest up for your expeditions.”

“...Okay.” Melissa nodded. “Good night, Dad.”

She took a thermos from the table where all their tools had been laid out, poured the drink into a cup, and handed it to Rikerton. He took the cup then turned back to his work; you could practically see him glowing with appreciation and affection for his daughter.

Melissa and I returned through the teleportation shed and walked back to our lodgings. A few steps ahead of me, she stopped and turned around.

“...Melissa?”

The wavering light from the magic lampposts reflected off the tears streaming down Melissa’s cheeks.

“Ah...”

Surprised, Melissa brought her fingers to her cheek as if only just then

realizing she'd been crying. I had a hunch about what had caused them to flow: According to Ceres, Melissa's mother was somewhere in District Five.

"...Is your father going to go see her?"

"Arihito...you knew?"

"Ceres told me. Melissa, do you...?" Before I could finish asking *want to see her, too?*, I realized there was no need.

She wiped away her tears, turned her reddened eyes toward me—and shook her head.

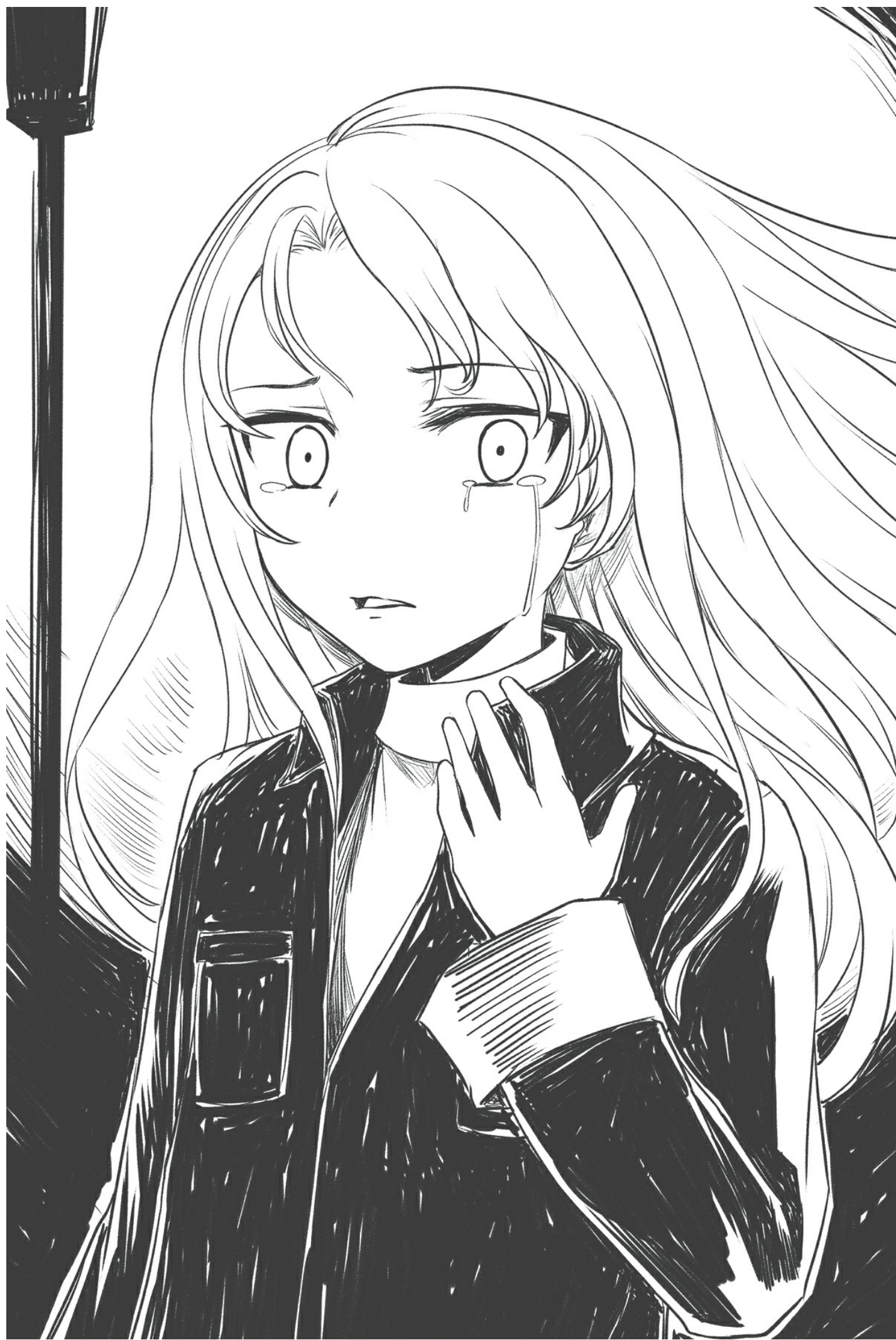
"We're both Seekers. We have our own goals. That's what's most important..."

"...Melissa, you've grown so much since you joined our party. I'm sure you could really support your mother now."

"Maybe. But I can't go see her."

"Is that...because you don't want to seem lonely or something?"

She started to say something—maybe along the lines of *No, that's not it*. But swallowing those words, she let out a long breath that trembled as it left her, and she nodded. The truth was, she would probably run to her mother this very instant if she could. But out of devotion to her role as a member of our party, she was doing her best to suppress that longing.



“...Theresia and Elitia really need us all now. I can go see Mama anytime.”

I’d always thought of Melissa as an old soul wiser than her years, calm, collected, decisive in battle. But all of that was just skin deep. In truth, she dearly cared for her friends—much more so than I’d given her credit for—and constantly looked out for Theresia, Elitia, and all the others.

“I see... Okay. I’m sure the others would be happy to hear how you feel about them.”

“...I hope so. But I’m different... I like dissecting monsters. I think your friends are scared of me.”

“Not at all. I was a little overwhelmed at the sight a moment ago, but you do a very important job. Just watching the way you hold your cleaver is really impressive.”

“...You’re exaggerating. You’re nice to everyone. That’s why you compliment people like that.”

“S-sorry... I didn’t mean to make you feel bad.”

I hadn’t intended to butter her up or anything; I only said what I truly believed. But if she didn’t like it, I had to reel it in—or so I thought until, twirling her hair around her finger, Melissa turned to me and whispered, “...Don’t tell anyone I said ‘Mama.’ That’s good enough for me.”

“A-all right. If that’s what you want...”

What did she mean by *good enough*? One thing I knew for sure: I should definitely respect her needs.

“I was really tiny when I saw my mama last,” she said by way of explanation.

I guess she felt safe using that name for her mother around me. I thought the name was really sweet; it conveyed how deeply she wished to reunite with her.

Thinking back on my conversations with Rikerton, I remembered he’d told me Melissa had spent only a very brief time with her mother after she was born. Since then, his wife had spent more than ten years in District Five, yet still she could not return to her human form. While I knew full well that Seekers all went at their own pace, the thought made me painfully aware of how much good

fortune must have shone on us to help us progress this quickly. In all my time in the Labyrinth Country, I'd met just one person who had successfully transformed back from a demi-human: Kozelka.

"You changed from a demi-human back into a human..."

"...At a cost of a great many sacrifices. Mr. Atobe, do you truly believe Ms. Theresia wishes you and your party to brave the dangers this plan will entail?"

Getting to the Cathedral in District Four was only half the battle; untold challenges still awaited us after that. Would Melissa's mother and her party manage to overcome them? Perhaps we could help? Or was that thought the height of arrogance, given we hadn't even brought Theresia back yet?

"I'm fine. My dad is, too. He believes in Mama and works hard."

"...You're right, he does. One day, the three of you will meet again—I'm sure of it."

"...Yeah."

She nodded back at me, and we headed into the suite. Theresia had been stretched out on the living room sofa but quickly sat up once we'd stepped inside.

"Sorry to wake you, Theresia. I wanted to go over Melissa's skills with her here for a minute. Would you mind?"

"....." Theresia shook her head.

Feels like I haven't seen her asleep in a long time.

I then saw Melissa come back out of the kitchen carrying a glass she'd filled with water and offer it to Theresia. Part of the set of dishes that came with the suite, the glass was a beautiful bright blue.

"...You look a little feverish."

"....."

Numerical figures on Theresia's license displayed how the Simian Lord's hex gnawed away at her. Fortunately, Evil Domination hadn't budged in the last few hours. Our afflicted friend seemed to relax a bit as she drank down the water,

but perhaps Melissa had picked up on some effects of the curse Theresia couldn't put into words. Instantly, my anger at the Simian Lord boiled into a furious rage that dominated my emotions. We had to take that damned monster down and had not a moment to lose.

"....." Theresia placed her hand over my tightly clenched fist, gently caressing it as if to say, *Don't go there*.

Finally, I relaxed my grip and sat down.

Melissa offered me some water, too, which helped cool my head. "...You have to stay calm. Or you'll fall into its trap," she warned.

"You're right... Sorry to worry you. I'm fine now," I reassured her, and asked to see her license.

She had a slew of diverse skills, including an unusually large number of promising ones she had not yet acquired. Regardless of whether she took any of these now, I needed to take a mental note of their specifics.

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

Scrape Off: Removes the target's outermost layer of armor or shell and strips them of some defensive skills. Weapon used in attack will dull significantly. Occasionally, user can acquire whatever the skill scraped off.

Level 2 Skills

Awl: Overrides target's defense on attack. Can be used only when attacking with a weapon.

Scale Removal: Increases chance of reducing the target's defense on attack. (Prerequisite: Lop Off)

Hang and Cut: Hangs the target up and then attacks. Increases chances of Partial Destruction. (Prerequisite: Dissection Mastery 1)

Frenzied Scratch: A barehanded attack consisting of up to 8 consecutive strikes. Inflicts Bleed status. (Prerequisite: Scratch)

Break Bones: Adds Bludgeoning damage to attack regardless of weapon type. Inflicts greater damage than normal attack.

Loud Voice: Emits a threatening cry that causes target to faint and reduces their magic.

Plattered Alive: Increases chances the user will deal a single fatal blow to fish-type monsters whose vitality has fallen a certain degree.

Sharpen Blade: Uses a tool to restore a blade's original sharpness.

Assess 2: Ascertains the effects imbued within foodstuffs, including monster materials, on the spot. (Prerequisite: Assess 1)

Twilight: Augments stats during hours of dim light or low-light locations and gives sneak attacks greater chance of success.

Level 1 Skills

Silent Mew: Reduces target's hostility toward the user.

Thorn Removal: Destroys thorns that appear in the terrain.

Cat Whisperer: Allows user to understand speech of cats and feline monsters.

Scratch: A barehanded attack consisting of 2 consecutive strikes. Inflicts Bleed status.

Cat's Landing: User takes no damage even when falling from a significant height.

Sharpen Nails: Increases damage of attacks inflicted with user's nails. Heals any psychological status ailments.

Toxin Test: Allows user to detect poison in food consumed. Reduces effects of poison.

Meal Prep: Properly prepares food for consumption and boosts meal effects.

Remaining Skill Points: 3

Melissa's skills fell into a couple of categories: those related to attacks, bladed weapons, cooking, and her own intrinsic features. As I'd expected, they all

seemed very useful. Assess 2 and Meal Prep especially if taken together appeared likely to provide clear benefits to any meals she cooked. Still, she had another three-point skill available that could do something the rest of us couldn't: Scrape Off.

“Strips them” of defensive skills—that means it can deactivate them, right?

We could have the most powerful weapons at our disposal and still run the risk of falling into a tricky situation if the enemy simply blocked them with a defensive skill. If Scrape Off could break through those defenses, we absolutely needed it.

“I think I need more attack skills. But I’ll take any you feel I should, like the one that boosts my capabilities during twilight.”

Armed with Cat Step, Melissa had a powerful means to evade attacks even on the front lines. I didn’t want to keep her in such a dangerous position all the time, but I did think going up for an occasional strategic strike suited her perfectly.

“...If you need one of these skills before our battle with the Simian Lord, take them. But depending on how effective Scape Off is, it might just cinch the win for us. I’d like to keep your points free so you can acquire it at any time.”

“Okay. I doubt I’ll really need any other skills if everyone else is with me. And I won’t take any that I can replace with equipment.”

Melissa understood exactly the importance of that latter point, one I always tried to keep in mind myself. While combining equipment and skills with the same effects could reinforce their benefits, it wasn’t the ideal solution. Generally speaking, I wanted to have the greatest variety of tools at our disposal to help us meet our goals.

“...Thanks for coming to get me. Good night.”

“No problem. Night.”

She got up to head to the bedroom—only to crumple almost immediately. By the time I got to my feet, Theresia had already rushed to Melissa and caught her mid-fall. For a few moments, Melissa stayed limp as a doll as if she’d fainted, but slowly came to.

...Her vitality and magic have almost bottomed out, but it looks like she's even more exhausted than those numbers suggest... I guess dissecting The Calamity really took a lot out of her...

"...I'm okay now. Thanks, Theresia."

"....."

"I didn't realize different monsters take more out of you to dissect... It'd be too much to ask you to keep that up on top of seeking, too. I'd like you to leave the expedition tomorrow to the rest of us."

Beads of sweat dotted Melissa's brow. I imagined she wanted to get in as much experience as she could before the battle with the Simian Lord to further hone her attacks, but when I went to wipe her forehead with my handkerchief, she averted her gaze.

"Tomorrow, I need you to focus on resting up and nothing else. Could you tell Rikerton for me, please?"

"Arihito..."

I feared Melissa might regret it later if she lost the chance to visit her mother by telling herself she had plenty of time left to do so while we remained in District Five. She was free to go to her—and just as free to tell us or keep it secret as she wished.

"...I'll make sure I do my part with dissecting. Next time, I'll go with you."

"Yes, of course. Just in case, though, let's restore some of your vitality and magic before you go to bed."

"...'Kay." She nodded obediently. Recovery Support would have also helped, but I had her drink a potion to restore vitality then walked behind her and activated Charge Assist. "...It's warm. Your magic is calming."

"Y-you think? I wonder if magic differs like that from person to person."

Turning around, she giggled and flashed an incredibly rare smile—but it lasted for only a second, soon replaced by her usual placid expression. "I'm gonna tell my dad I'll help him tomorrow," she informed me, and left to go see Rikerton in the Repository once more.

We no longer heard voices coming from the bedrooms; perhaps the other ladies had fallen asleep. It was just Theresia and me now. After noticing my gaze, she stared back unblinkingly.

“You should get a good rest, too, Theresia...though I guess it might be hard to get back to sleep, huh?” Theresia shook her head, then before I could ask, went to turn off the lights. “Good night, Theresia.”

I lay down on the sofa, covering myself with a blanket, but sleep didn’t come right away. Instead, images of what we’d seen in the Blazing Red Mansion floated past my mind’s eye. I mentally replayed the sequence of events that began with Theresia’s attack on the Simian Lord—and ended when it marked her with a curse. I’d known how dangerous the Simian Lord was but even so had completely relied on Theresia. If she hadn’t snuck up behind it, I dreaded to think what would have happened; most likely, it would have dragged Alphecca to it and captured all of us.

This time, I’m going to protect you—I swear. I’m going to take back everything that damned ape has stolen.

In the dark room, I heard Theresia momentarily abandon her attempt at sleep on the other sofa and get up. When I opened my eyes, I saw she had come over to peek at me, her hand over her heart.

“...Can’t sleep?”

“.....”

She said nothing, but I noticed her hand lay on the button to undo her body suit; maybe it was uncomfortable to sleep in. If so, I wanted to do whatever I could for her.

“...I know. Theresia, mind turning away from me for a minute?”

“.....”

She turned around. Our brave Rogue hadn’t yet recovered all the magic she’d used against the Simian Lord—but I could fix that.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated RECOVERY SUPPORT 2

> ARIHITO used MID-GRADE MANA POTION → ARIHITO recovered magic

> THERESIA recovered magic in tandem

“.....!” The mana potion restored my magic, then Theresia’s as well. “.....”

I didn’t know whether the hex would let her recover all her magic with sleep alone and figured it might be easier to fall asleep once it had replenished. But then she turned around and looked at me. Though the dark made it hard to make anything out clearly, I thought I saw her lizard mask flush bright red.

She moved her lips as if to say something, but no sound escaped them. Then, as if encouraging me to sleep, she pulled the cover over me and gave my chest a few gentle pats. It felt like she was tucking me in—comforting me. Even in moments like these when by all rights I should’ve been the one comforting her, she always came to my rescue.

“.....”

Though I’d expected to her walk away, she actually seemed to get closer. I could feel her breath right at my side. It lasted only a moment, though, after which I sensed her pull back. I desperately wished I could talk to her, especially in times like this. If nothing else, I wanted to make sure that wish wouldn’t be relegated to some far-off dream for long.

For now, I needed sleep so that the next morning I could get moving and make the most of every last day we had here.

CHAPTER 3

District Five Labyrinths and Their Inhabitants

Part I: Morning Scenery / The Cart

Light filtered in through the slit between the living room curtains; just as hints of white began to lighten the morning sky, I woke with a start.

“Ah...!” Mere inches from my face, a woman clamped her hand over her mouth in surprise; it was Louisa, clad in her Guild employee uniform, evidently just about ready to start her day. She straightened up with a snap and backed away. Supporting herself with a hand against the sofa, she’d been leaning over and peering down at me—maybe I’d been sleeping like the dead and gotten her worried?

“G-good morning, Louisa. Heading out already?”

“Y-yes... Even as Specially Appointed Staff, I still have regular duties delegated to me while we remain in District Five,” she explained.

“I hope it’s nothing too taxing. Have you had breakfast?”

“Yes, I ordered a light breakfast from Maria at the Forest Diner. It got here not long ago. She sent over hot coffee, tea, and soup in a few magic pots.”

“Coffee... That takes me back. I haven’t had a sip since I came to the Labyrinth Country, though. Do the beans come from a labyrinth around here?”

“Oh yes, they naturally grow in some labyrinths in this district. However, as the shrubs which bear the coffee fruit are located in remote and difficult-to-access areas, there’s a limit on how much can be harvested,” she told me. “... Mr. Atobe, may I serve you a cup?”

“Yes, please... Oh, but maybe it’s best I wait. The girls might want some, too.”

“Not to worry, there’s enough for everyone,” she assured me with a bright smile. Bringing the pot over, she poured the steaming brew into one of the provided porcelain cups and set it on a saucer.

The moment the coffee streamed out of the spout, I knew the fragrant aroma, the very first taste, would dredge up old memories of my days at work.

"I'm amazed you manage to drink coffee without a hint of sugar, Atobe... Though, if you ask me, café au lait is so much better."

Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten about that...

I was remembering one morning when Igarashi made me a café au lait at our company's coffee bar. She'd just arrived and, unable to stand seeing the living corpse I'd become after another all-nighter, prepared me a cup of the reviving elixir. Though I'd always taken my coffee black up until that point, afterward I found myself going for café au laits around half the time. Igarashi needed even more sugar to make the coffee go down—a fact I knew since I'd also prepared more than my fair share of cups of joe for her as her subordinate.

"Mm, so good... L-Louisa?"

A troubled expression had clouded her face. I couldn't blame her—it'd been rude of me to go for a solitary stroll down memory lane in front of her. But surprisingly, she chuckled, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, *What am I going to do with you?*

"May I assume...coffee carries quite a few treasured memories for you?"

"Y-yeah... Though I wouldn't exactly call them treasured. I just remembered how I used to live on coffee when I worked under Igarashi."

"...And which would you say you preferred, the coffee then or this cup you have here?"

"U-umm...", I hemmed. "It's hard to say..."

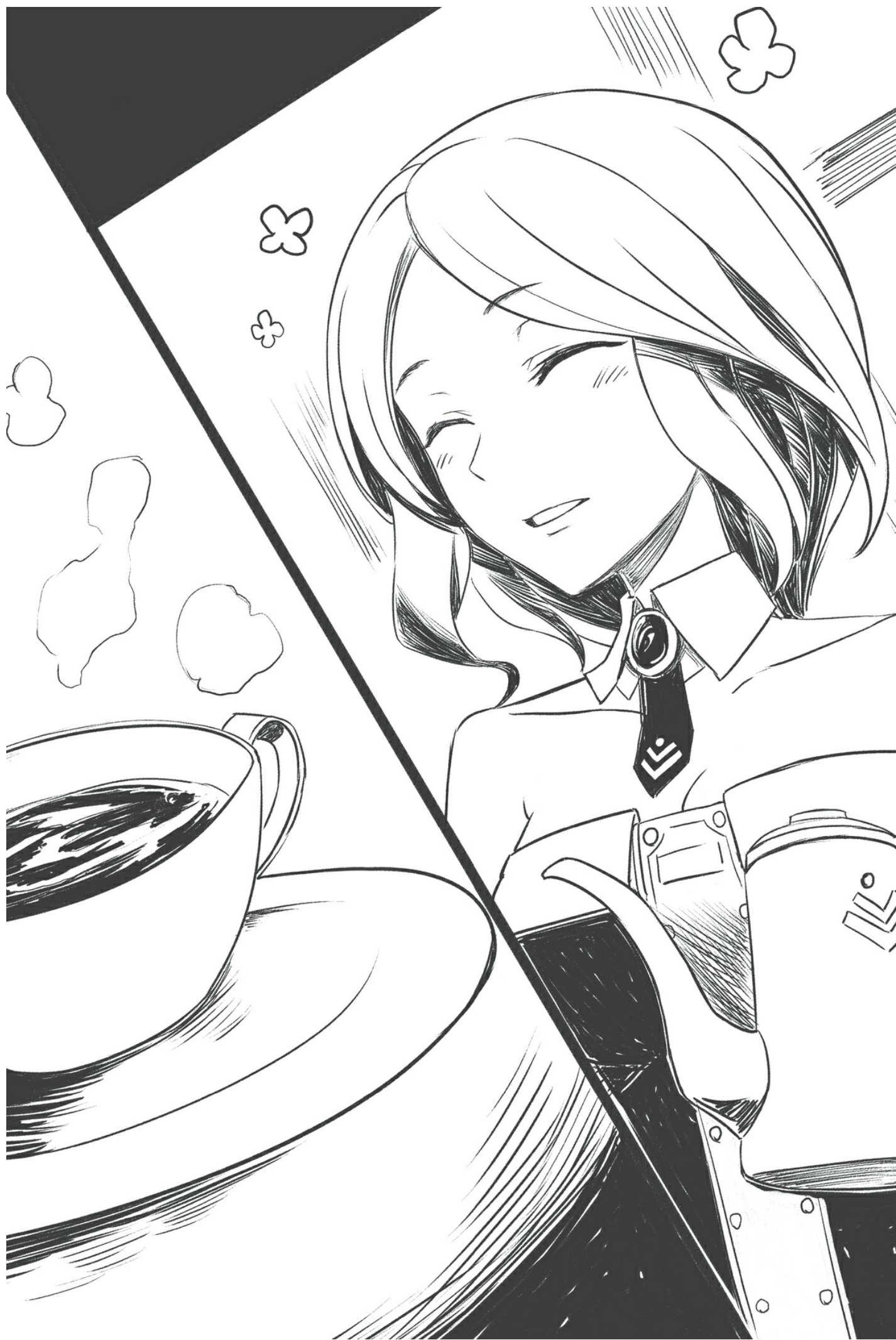
"...That's the part where you read the room a little and tell Louisa hers is much tastier, don't you think?"

Just as I'd thought others might start to wake up, my hunch proved correct. Igarashi, the very person I'd just spoken of, stepped somewhat abashedly out of the bedroom.

"Good morning, Kyouka," Louisa said. "Mr. Atobe was just telling me you took much kinder care of him as his boss than your stories led me to believe."

"I—I wouldn't go that far... I was a terrible boss, working him to the bone many times harder than the occasional kind gesture could make up for. By the

end, you were avoiding me, weren't you, Atobe?"



“N-no, I wouldn’t say I was *avoiding* you...”

“...You were, though, right?”

Working directly under Igarashi’s orders, I wound up taking on so many projects with her that rumors Big Boss Igarashi favored me most started to spread. She didn’t notice in the slightest, though, and I felt too timid to say anything. That was why, when she started giving me orders soon after we’d reincarnated, I had the strongest urge to chew her out—a feeling I regretted, looking back, as that was definitely not the time or the place to indulge in grudges.

“Ah... S-sorry, I didn’t mean to corner you. It’s just, the memory makes me feel like I owe you a million apologies, and I took it out on you...”

“Is that perhaps why you don’t call Mr. Atobe by his first name?”

“Huh...? H-hey, hang on a second. Aren’t you going a little hard on me today, Louisa...?”

“Oh, no, I would never... Right, Mr. Atobe?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, r-right...,” I stammered. “Igarashi, why are you glaring at me like that...?”

Louisa chuckled at how flustered I’d gotten. Brooding over how things were never easy with grown women, I took another swig of coffee to calm my harried nerves.



Once the others had awoken, we ate breakfast and prepared to leave for the day.

“Arihito, Falma said she can’t leave District Eight right away, but she should be here by evening.”

“Oh, she got in touch with you? Thanks for letting me know... Madoka, how about we go buy that cart we talked about before today?”

“Do you mean it?! Yay...! I’ve wanted one for so long. A Merchant with a cart seems so much more professional, don’t you think?”

“All right, how about we go check out the carts then head to the archive?”

After listening to our conversation, Igarashi came up behind Madoka and placed a caring hand on her shoulder. Madoka looked embarrassed but still let Igarashi do as she pleased. It warmed my heart to see how close they’d become.

“I need to see about talking to an expert on hexes who Ceres suggested we meet with...though to be honest, I don’t know if we’ll be able to get in touch at the archive or even find any clues as to where they might be.”

“Really? Maybe the two have a somewhat complicated relationship...,” Igarashi mused. “But maybe it’s best not to pry. We should be grateful she gave us any leads to begin with.”

I filled Igarashi in on what Ceres had shared with me. We didn’t always meet with the Rune Maker as a full group, but I imagined it would put everyone much more at ease to work with all the information we’d gained in mind.

“This may be a little late in the game to ask, but who exactly is Ceres? I mean, she’s got connections to peeps in District Five and all—maybe she’s like a super big shot and we just don’t know it...?” wondered Misaki in admiration.

Honestly, I had to admit I was curious myself, though our questions would have to wait as Ceres and Steiner were away at their workshop.

“She must have her reasons for not telling us everything,” Igarashi added. “I wonder what kind of job makes you an expert on curses...?”

“I can think of a few possibilities,” I replied. “After all, Shirone’s job involved hexes and the like, too.”

While officially a Charm Master, Shirone had carried two swords with her: Heaven’s Stiletto and Bloodsucker. If we assumed she used them both at once, she must’ve practiced some sort of dual blade swordsmanship, though the image didn’t exactly match with how I pictured a Charm Master might fight.

“She used to be a Dual Fencer,” Elitia informed us. “But as to why she changed jobs... I think she must’ve thought that would give her a better chance at wielding a colored, inscribed weapon.”

“A colored weapon...”

Elitia’s sword, the Scarlet Emperor, bore a color in its name, a feature I figured all such weapons probably shared.

“Do you mean there are other weapons with colors in their titles? Are all those cursed, too?”

“Yes... I don’t know how many the White Night Brigade have in total now, but the captain and a few others carry their own. They’re not all weapons, though; some are defensive gear, too.”

“Ellie, do the Brigade members know how to control those cursed weapons...?” Suzuna asked.

Elitia’s expression darkened. Then her eyes fixed on her own sheathed cursed blade, and she said, “We were all told to equip one of these to take on the unique job it came with. They call it ‘being chosen by the weapon.’ The only one in the Brigade who’s moved past that stage...must be my brother, Johan.”

Moved past that stage—did that mean he managed to control his colored weapon and subjugate the curse? Elitia had also shown signs of maturing into her profession over the many battles we’d fought. After defeating her thousandth foe, for example, she’d unlocked the capacity to acquire a skill called Scarlet Dance.

“Is there something specific you have to do to get past that stage?” I asked.

“...I don’t know. My brother said the requirements differ depending on the weapon’s color, but he doesn’t fully trust anyone. Even his vice captain, Agnes, told me sometimes she didn’t understand what he was thinking.”

“And yet an entire band of people still follow your brother... The other Brigade members must have great faith in him as a leader,” Seraphina commented.

Elitia didn’t deny it. “I know I shouldn’t talk badly about my own family, but... my brother’s not the same person I once knew. He used to be so gentle and quiet, burying himself in books for hours on his days off, but now...”

The Labyrinth Country held no shortage of devastation for Seekers. Perhaps

Elitia's brother had gone through a terrible experience that sparked this change. If so, it wouldn't be right to hold the shift against him without knowing those circumstances. The Brigade may have given up on saving Rury, but we would not stop until she was safe. While I wasn't sure how our actions would come across to them, I knew we couldn't afford to worry about that.

"...I may disagree with your brother on some points, Elitia, but I will always support you unconditionally—no matter what."

"Arihito... Thank you. For now, I just hope I don't have to see him again. I think that's probably best for both of us, now that I've left the Brigade."

"*Haaah*, I would've been allll about meeting up if he was nice, y'know. But he sounds a smidge like a horror story villain, so I'm totes down to just keep a very distant eye on him."

Personally, I wanted to try and talk to him and get answers to something that had been on my mind: why Shirone went all the way down to District Seven intent on antagonizing us. If she'd acted on his orders, I'd have to assume he would stop at nothing to get what he wanted. This whole story brought home a feeling I'd had for a while: We could not let our guard down around the Brigade.



The northwestern part of District Five was home to a workshop that specialized in carts. The shop's chief artisan, a bearded man who appeared not much older than me, used oil-stained, worn gloves, which spoke to years of frequent use and lent him the air of an experienced artisan.

"Name's McCain. I'm the second generation in my family to run this workshop," he told us. "So what kind of cart are you looking for?"

"My friend here is a Merchant with the Equip Cart skill, so I imagine we'll use it to carry all sorts of items as we go, but for now, we need one that can haul a heavy piece of weaponry," I explained.

"So the little lady's gonna handle it? Heavy weaponry, is it? Y'all must be gearin' up to tackle a damn big fish, I take it. In that case, we're gonna have to add extra support for all that weight."

"Extra support... You mean increase its load capacity or something?"

McCain nodded then brought over a metal rod with a few holes in the middle. “This here’s what you use to push the cart. We make it so you can insert magic stones or runes in this bit. Stick a Lighten Stone, Floating Stone, or sometimes even a Flying Stone in there, and it’s a whole new cart. Seems to me that weapon y’all need to lug’s a real monster, but that won’t mean anythin’ to someone who can use Equip Cart.”

“I see... Sounds like you can get a pretty advanced tune-up.”

I’d only used the phrase on a whim, but McCain’s eyes lit up at the word *tune-up*. “I was a mechanic in my previous life, right, and when I first got here, I thought all that experience’d just go down the drain. It’s tough to explain, but magic tools and machinery opened up all sorta doors for me. I could build an engine from scratch if I put enough time into it, but there’s no need when magic tools can stand in and do the exact same thing. I swear, the moment I realized I could upgrade any cart with the right magic stone, I got shivers all over.”

“So...does that mean you invented magic stone–powered carts?”

“That it does. Most carts do a good enough job for everyday use, see. But one day I had a customer who wanted to try adding a leftover Lighten Stone to the cart, and the rest is history. That’s how we first started offering the service.”

“S-sorry to interrupt, but...would I need to prepare the stones myself to use an upgraded cart like that?” Madoka asked nervously. McCain just smiled then pointed to a shelving unit in a corner of the workshop.

“No, little lady, we provide those for you—at a fair price, of course,” he assured her. “In your case, let’s see. If you’re wanting to lug a cannon-sized weapon, you’re probably better off loading the cart with slots instead of focusing on the weight-bearing capacity.”

“Slots...? As in, a specific slot where you can load any item, regardless of its weight?”

“Essentially. We use this Storage Stone that’s goin’ for twenty-five hundred gold at the moment, but it’s worth much more. You just watch—that price tag’s bound to skyrocket soon enough. When you add it to a cart, it designates a certain number of slots that can carry items no matter how heavy.”

Sounds like the perfect solution for what we need right now. We don't have hours or days to go searching for a specific stone, so it's expensive, but in a sense it's like buying time.

"A-Arihito...", Madoka fretted.

"Don't worry, our budget can cover that," I told her. "McCain, we're definitely going to need that Storage Stone, but can you also do anything to make the cart easier to transport?"

"Of course. We can modify it so it'll run on magic in a pinch, or give it finer steering and handling for pulling by hand. Just try to picture how you'll most likely use it, and we can design your cart from there."

We'd come to purchase a cart, but all this choosing what options and finishes we wanted to get was starting to make it feel more like buying a car.

"If need be, you can call on us to power the cart. However, we shall rely on you in situations where we cannot materialize, Master," I heard Alphecca say.

Shortly after, Murakumo joined the conversation from her sheath on my back.

"Carts have their own role to play, Alphecca. Do not fear; you shall not be replaced."

"Such thoughts did not occur to us. If anything, perhaps Master shall have less use for you, Murakumo, once equipped with a cart that can bear such mighty weapons."

"Inconceivable," Murakumo retorted. "As a uniquely powerful close-combat weapon Master can wield, I have untold avenues for contributing to his strength in battle yet to explore."

I'd never heard Ariadne's armaments bicker among themselves. It took me slightly aback. "I'm going to have to rely on both of you more than you can imagine, so try not to fight, okay?" I told them.

"...We shall strive our utmost."

"I'd like you to put me to efficient use whenever the opportunity presents. I have no doubt you and your comrades will grow stronger, Master, yet should your foes become equally more formidable, I believe Ariadne shall grant you

that permission.”

“Mr. Arihito, what do you think we should do?” Seraphina asked. “I have engaged in battle alongside armored vehicles as well, and believe I could also assist with the cart.”

“Thank you very much, Ms. Seraphina. But I’m a member of this party, too, so please leave the cart to me! I promise I’ll do my part!” Madoka vowed.

But as she had little battle experience, I decided to keep in mind I could always rely on Seraphina or Cion to help protect Madoka if necessary. And in keeping with her wishes, I asked McCain to bolster the cart so that one person could maneuver it with ease.

In the end, this is what we went with:

◆Heaven’s Steel Wheel +3◆

- > Load-bearing cart forged from HEAVEN’S STEEL
- > Modified with STORAGE STONE
- > Modified with ACCELERATION STONE
- > Modified with LIGHTEN STONE

“I’m going to forge the chassis from this Heaven’s Steel. It’s a lightweight yet sturdy metal with a white luster that’s often used in armor or equipment around District Six. We sometimes get a shipment of even higher-quality metal, but that’d bump the price point way up. That said, Heaven’s Steel is the second-best metal we put into carts in our workshop, so you can trust it’ll be all you need.”

“Thank you, McCain.”

“If I’m being honest, that two-day deadline was a punch to the gut... Might’ve been too much even for me if I hadn’t already gotten a head start on a cart I meant to sell.”

I’d tempered my request on the short turnaround with qualifiers like *if at all possible* or *if you could try your best* to meet the deadline, but McCain had readily agreed, asking only for a mana potion he could use to refill the magic

he'd spend while building it as payment for the rush on the job.

"If you don't mind me asking, what's got you in such a hurry?"

"We need this cart to take down a certain monster, and I want to do all I can to prepare before we face it."

"Gotcha... And you're pressed for time, I take it. Well, don't be a stranger. Let me know if anything about the cart isn't up to snuff, and I'll modify it for you. 'S long as I got time, I'd be more than happy to make it an even sweeter ride," he said, then smiled and patted me lightly on the shoulder. "And do share some o' those so-called daring exploits after you make it back in one piece."

"Of course, it'd be my pleasure. Thank you very much, McCain."

Our order complete, we left the workshop. No sooner had we stepped through the front door and begun our walk toward the archive than we heard the clanging of metal behind us.

Part II: The Archive

The archive in District Five lay close to the Middle Guild; constructed of stone, it looked far more collegiate than the other libraries I knew. A man clad in armor who I took to be a guard stood at the entrance. After walking past him, we saw a woman who looked like an archivist coming our way.

“Welcome, I’ll just need to check your license before you enter... Oh my, you’re All-Star Seekers?”

“Yes, as of just yesterday.”

“Then you must have been summoned to quell the stampede, I assume. Please accept my sincere thanks for all the hard work fulfilling your mission... No, perhaps I should say, rising to the request.”

“Oh, either one is fine. We didn’t do much, but it was an honor to assist.”

The word *mission* might imply we acted out of obligation. However, since we were Seekers, the Guild could not compel us to help, so she must have corrected herself out of consideration for us.

“As I imagine you saw for yourselves, rare indeed are the Seekers who choose to aid in subduing a stampede. Our library also functions as an evacuation center, so those of us employed here also joined the fight to protect it, though we just barely managed to prevent any Death Stalkers from forcing their way inside.”

“Wow... Above all else, I’m glad you made it through safely.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind. Now then, allow me to escort you to the main collection,” the archivist announced.

Then, after adjusting the tassels on her hat, which reminded me of a graduation cap, she began showing us the way.

“Think she’d flip if we came out and said, ‘But that’s not all—we’re actually the Most Distinguished Seekers!’?” Misaki said to our group.

“Atobe’s always preferred not to brag about those sorts of accomplishments himself.”

“I never cease to admire the humility Mr. Arihito continuously displays,” added Seraphina.

“Oh yes,” Suzuna agreed. “Arihito is always modest, but never fails to rise to the moment... That’s just the kind of man he is.”

“True... I don’t think I’ve seen many other men as gentlemanly as he is,” said Elitia.

My party members sang my praises one after the other as they walked ahead of me, putting me in a very awkward position.

“Woow... That whole wall is packed with books from floor to ceiling! It’s like those atriums you see in the libraries in movies,” Madoka marveled, snapping me out of my funk.

We’d made it to the main collection area—books crammed in every visible inch of the towering bookcases. Ladders had been installed flush with the shelves; were we supposed to climb them to pull books out?

“This is incredible... About how many books are included in this collection?” I asked.

“We have about three hundred thousand books in this area, as well as smaller collections where we keep special tomes,” the archivist informed me.

“Do you think this collection has any of the books we need...?” Igarashi wondered aloud.

“One of my skills allows me to immediately search our entire library for any information you seek. If you provide me with a few key words, I can also probe for related phrases.”

“That would be very helpful. In that case, would you please help us look for books related to the Simian Lord, the Blazing Red Mansion, and hexes?” I requested.

“A-Arihito, tell me you cut straight to the point without telling me you cut straight to the point, am I ri—?!”

“Don’t interrupt. We don’t have time to beat around the bush here,” Igarashi chided. I understood what Misaki was getting at but this time had to side entirely with Igarashi; the moment called for blunt questions.

After a flash of momentary surprise, the archivist closed her eyes as if in prayer—then: “I’ve found one book regarding the Simian Lord, two related to the Blazing Red Mansion, and around ten touching on hexes in this main section of the library. Here are the titles,” she said.

Scanning the list she’d written up for us, I saw a few titles: *Elementary Hexes*, *Distinctive Monster Attacks: Curses Edition*, and *Hex-Related Occupations*. Every title seemed promising, and since there weren’t that many, I decided we should check them all out.

“Considering this is the main section of the library, could there be similar titles housed in the smaller collections you mentioned?” Seraphina asked the archivist, who nodded in reply.

“Yes, though those are mainly personally donated books. Tomes on curses can be found in the sixty-sixth collection of the archive.”

“If we can’t find the information we’re looking for in these volumes, might we be able to peruse those collections as well?” I asked.

“The special collections can only be accessed under the stipulation that no books be checked out of the archive. Would you still care to examine them?”

“Yes, please. We’re desperate for any clues we can get.”



The titles on curses rested on shelves in the middle of the bookcase. That said, the middle was still quite a ways up the wall—the ladder had been fitted with safeguards to prevent accidental falls, although I still couldn’t stomach the idea of looking down.

“D’you think our friend Mage the Arachnomage could just scurry up the walls and get the books for us?” wondered Misaki.

“Probably, but evidently we can’t use Summoning Pendants inside the archive,” I told her.

“Who knew they had such a crazy thing going on in here, huh?”

We couldn't all climb up one ladder to get a book, so we rock, paper, scissorsed it out to choose who'd have to go. Surprisingly, Misaki voiced zero complaints when she lost and nimbly began stepping up the rungs.

Elitia went after the book on the Simian Lord, and Igarashi got tasked with finding the ones on the Blazing Red Mansion. Ten books would be a lot to carry for one person, so Misaki and I went to get them together. Once we'd found the volumes we were looking for, we brought them back to the reading room to check out their contents.

“This book on District Five monsters mentions the Simian Lord, but...it doesn't seem to have any details on how previous generations were defeated, or any other new details we can use,” Elitia said.

I went over to where she sat and had her show me what she meant. The book had an illustration of the Simian Lord, but it wasn't a very accurate depiction.

“Looks like they only list skills we've already seen it use, huh...? Don't see anything on Etch-a-Hex, though,” I noted. “Maybe that's something the newest Simian Lord started?”

“Every time a Named Monster regenerates, it can display different resistances and the like, so it follows they may also wield unique skills as well,” Seraphina explained.

“Arihito, I found a map of the Blazing Red Mansion in this one. Do you think it might be helpful?” Madoka asked, bringing over a tome titled *Survey of District Five Labyrinths*.

The section on the Blazing Red Mansion had incredibly detailed notes on the first floor, where no monsters lived, but those specifics grew significantly sparser from the second floor and below. As justification for this discrepancy, the authors offered a note that read, “Insurmountable obstacles impeded further investigation.” Something must have happened while the researchers explored the second floor.

“Looks like the research unit that provided the data for this book managed to reach the entry to the third floor. Do you think the Simian Lord built that

fortress to block anyone from going down that far...?" I wondered aloud.

"Some monsters habitually endeavor to prevent Seekers from accessing deeper floors of the labyrinths. Perhaps that instinct runs especially strong in the Simian Lord, or it has something it wants to protect. Irrespective of the reason, however, that treacherous ape's hostility toward Seekers remains extremely dangerous." Seraphina spoke calmly, but her voice had a certain vigor whenever she touched on the Simian Lord.

In the end, we found little for our efforts. I looked through the books on curses, too, but none had anything about the hex the Simian Lord had used.

"Atobe, how about you check out the special collection?" Igarashi offered. "We'll look through these a bit more while you're at it."

"Yeah, good idea," I replied, and got up from my chair. Theresia, who had been quietly observing things, pattered over to me. After the two of us found the archivist and asked for permission to see the special collection, she led us to a teleportation door that would take us to it.

"Please be aware monsters may be lurking in camouflage within the pages of some of these books," she warned. "Some of these have kept up the disguises for so many decades that even we archivists cannot distinguish between truth or mimicry. As an extra precaution, please take great care when you flip through the pages. Should you see any text moving, there is a very good chance a monster is behind it."

"A-all right... We'll be careful," I promised.

Then, praying we wouldn't hit that awful jackpot, I ducked through the teleportation door into a dim room much smaller than the central section. The books had been evenly spaced out along the shelves. A single black, leather-bound copy stood out from the rest.

Picking that from the shelf, the archivist announced, "This one is titled *Hex-Related Occupations and Monsters*."

"Thank you very much. Then, if I may..."

Carefully, I took the book in hand. A green, gem-like stone had been inlaid in the center of the cover.

Is this...jade? Could it have something to do with Ceres's race...?

As I turned page after page, I found one with an illustration of a person—one whose neck bore a mark very similar to the one on Theresia.

Hexes, a subsection of curses, leave marks somewhere on the target's body.

Select monsters can cast curses, many of which increase in potency after the monster has perished; some unlucky victims bear the symptoms for life.

As such, it is crucial to follow all the steps to lift a curse before attempting to defeat the monster that cast it.

“.....” Theresia tugged on my hand, so I tilted the book to show her.

We kept flipping through the book but found nothing else on those crucial steps to lift the curse it had mentioned. Halfway through, the pages were all blank. Who in the world had written this book? Did that person live in District Five or maybe another district entirely?

Turning around to ask the archivist a question, I handed the book to Theresia. Just then—

—the dim room suddenly flashed with brilliant light. It seemed to be coming from behind me.

“...Please, step away from the book...!” the archivist cried out, but the blinding light had gradually begun to dim. A faint, green glow emanated from the book in Theresia's hands.

“.....”

“Whoa...”

I went to stand next to Theresia and had her show me the book. That's when text began to fill pages that had been completely blank only a moment before. The writing looked like a string of cuneiform characters, perhaps an ancient form of Labyrinth Country script:

“...These are the writings of the Labyrinth Country's most ancient peoples. They read, 'Twilight Lakeside Stroll,'” I heard Ariadne say. She had read the text through my eyes.

Very soon after, the glowing letters faded out of view. One clue as to why this unexpected phenomenon occurred lay right before my eyes—the suspicious shine emanating from the mark on the nape of Theresia’s neck.

“You two, that light...did it come from the book in your hands? If so, we shall have to investigate this further.”

“I think it probably reacts differently depending on the person who holds it. It doesn’t seem dangerous, though, so please don’t worry too much.”

“H-how could I not...?”

“This is just my guess, but...I think the book lights up in the hands of anyone bearing an active curse. We came to here today to find clues for how to lift the mark you see here,” I told the archivist. “I can’t thank you enough for showing us this book.”

I’d never imagined we’d find a clue like this. I also figured we owed it to the archivist to share as much about our situation as possible after putting her through such a shock.

“I...I hadn’t even considered why you inquired about curses, or why you would be searching for this kind of book. I must admit, I’m quite ashamed of myself as an archivist.”

“N-no, please don’t be... If anything, we didn’t want to raise any suspicions and came here intending to explain as little as we could about our problem. It was entirely my doing.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you to say. However, as a curator in this archive, I strive to support our Seeker guests to the best of my ability. This has taught me I must endeavor to demonstrate to all our guests that they can safely trust me with their concerns.”

“...I’d say you’ve been incredibly helpful already. I know I sound like a broken record, but I truly can’t thank you enough.”

The archivist took the book from Theresia and returned it to its place on the shelf. Then, after readjusting the tassel on her cap as if to get a handle on her emotions, she gestured for us to go on ahead of her back to the teleportation door through which we’d come.



Twilight Lakeside Stroll, as it turned out, was a labyrinth in the southeastern quarter of District Five. Warm, humid air flowed out of a dark cave that you apparently had to delve into to transport to the labyrinth.

“...The entrance is really creepy... It feels like something bad is about to happen...”

“Ms. Kyouka, are you all right? Perhaps it’s best you do not push yourself too much...,” Seraphina gently suggested.

“I-I’m fine. Plus, I have a skill to dispel Fear... N-not that I’m scared or anything, of course. Ghosts don’t come out in broad daylight, after all.”

“Sure, but some labyrinths do craaaazy things with time, don’t they? Maybe this one’s, like, stuck in an endless dark evening?”

“M-Misaki, do you really have to point it out like that...?”

“My point is, shouldn’t we get some lamps or whatever?” she clarified. “...Or do you think it’s not *that* dark inside?”

“The Guild publishes alerts regarding labyrinths with zero visibility, so it would appear external light sources are not absolutely necessary for exploring this one,” Seraphina informed us. I felt another swell of gratitude that she’d joined our party. Her advice at crucial moments like this made all the difference.

“Kyouuuka, you better watch your back or you’re gonna lose out, long history with Arihito or not,” Misaki teased.

“Th-that’s...,” Igarashi stammered. “I rely on Seraphina just as much, you know...”

“We’ve pulled through all sorts of scrapes together so far, and we’ll do it again, even if the monster is a little frightful.” Elitia had clearly meant to lighten Igarashi’s spirits, but her encouragement moved Misaki and Suzuna more than anybody else. “Wh-what...?”

“Oh nothiiiing. You just seem back to your usual self, though, and, like, gave my tear glands a huuuge whack while you were at it.”

“I’m so...so glad. You’re right; let’s keep doing all we can *together*. If we work

as one, there's nothing we can't overcome."

"...You guys don't have to baby me so much," Elitia protested. "But thanks."

We were certainly pressed for time, but we'd never do our best work if we constantly beat ourselves up. We walked forward together, side by side with our closest friends. One look at the beaming smile Elitia flashed gave me faith—faith that she would never again forget she was not alone.

Part III: Twilight Lakeside Stroll, First Floor

Humid drafts wafting past us, we ducked into the cave and walked out onto a meadow covered in short grasses. A quick look around revealed a lake a short walk away. Unlike at the Beach of the Setting Sun, time here seemed frozen at the uncertain moment when you couldn't be sure if the sun had dipped completely beneath the horizon. Igarashi walked ahead of me, glancing every which way as she went—this labyrinth appeared a little too overwhelming for her after all.

Choosing her words carefully out of concern for Igarashi, Suzuna looked out at the lake steeped in the colors of dusk and said, "The witching hour...isn't that what twilight is called in Japan? That's what this seems like to me."

"I wonder which is worse luck, that or the dead of night...," Igarashi whispered, then grasped Suzuna's arm.

Misaki snickered at the sight—Gamblers, evidently, were naturally gutsier than Valkyries.

"Ooh, what if we've got to get to the middle of that big ol' lake? Think we'll have to go for another swim?"

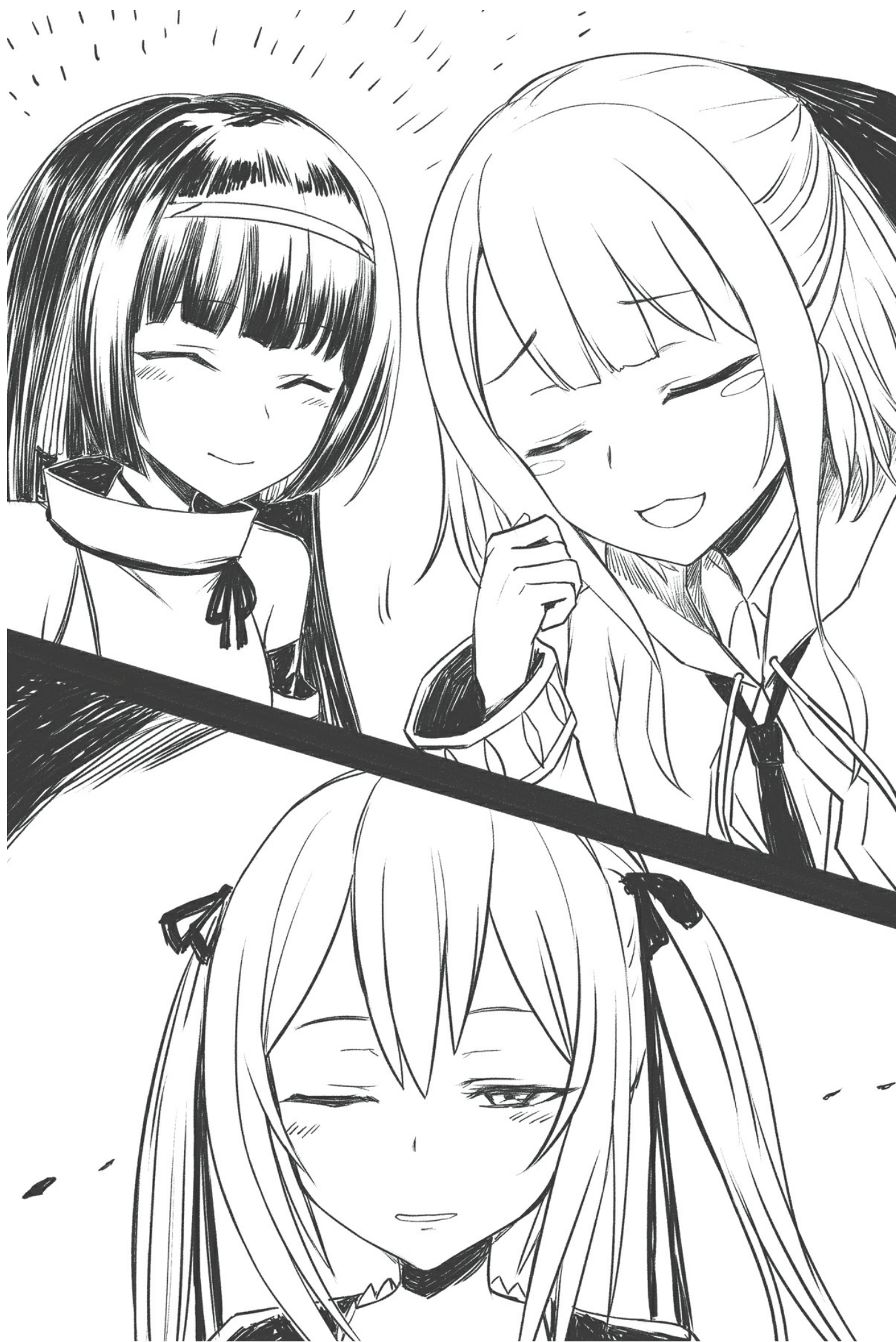
"W-we can't go swimming when it's this dark!" Igarashi quickly protested. "The resort was one thing, but there's no telling what might be lurking under this lake."

"That's true... You never can tell what monsters might live in labyrinth waters," I said.

The Merciless Guillotine had also popped out of the sea at the Beach of the Setting Sun without warning. I couldn't help but wonder if something else that formidable would show itself as I looked out over the water.

"From what I saw in the archive's books, water snakes are the strongest foe here, but they don't appear that often. Apparently, it's best to go around the lake from the west to get to the second floor," Elitia said.

“Indeed, they did advise against following the eastern route. Perhaps that indicates it’s a more challenging path...or alternatively, leads to secrets the archive cannot disclose. When considered in that light, the warning counterintuitively gives me the sense it may be worth exploring in that direction...,” Seraphina added to the nuggets of information she and Elitia had discovered in the archive.



West or east—we had to decide which way to go before anything else.

“.....”

Theresia had spent the last few moments staring off into the east. Something must’ve been on her mind.

“...Oh, I know. Suzuna, do you think now might be a good moment to activate Oracle?” I suggested.

“You think perhaps the message could guide us in the right direction? All right, I’ll try my best.”

“Whoaaa... Suzu, you just keep getting more and more like a true priestess... D’ya think you might upgrade to, like, a Super Shrine Maiden one of these days?”

“A Seeker can, in fact, evolve into a more advanced iteration of their occupation after fulfilling certain conditions, so it may indeed be possible,” Seraphina replied, answering a question I was sure Misaki had meant in jest.

What would the advanced iteration of my job be? Does that even exist?

I hadn’t met anyone who’d told me up front that they’d reached that level of their profession. It’s possible I already knew one or two who had: District Five Commander Dylan and Kozelka would be my first guesses.

“Arihito, I’m ready.”

After activating Salt Laying, Suzuna had sprinkled the white mineral on the ground in a circle. This step wasn’t included in the requirements for activating Oracle, but Suzuna apparently considered it only proper to do so before asking to draw from the power of the gods. I nodded at her; after a brief moment of prayer, Suzuna clapped her hands together loudly.

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated ORACLE → Received DIVINE REVELATION from
ARIADNE

“O beloved recipients of my grace, ye wandering souls, I shall illuminate the path you must take.”

Ariadne's voice resounded loud enough for everyone in the party to hear. Then, as if embodying the message Ariadne wished to send, Suzuna pointed toward the east.

"...Unlike Medium, this Oracle appeals to my divine elements," the Hidden God told me privately. Her unfailingly conscientious explanations were always a great help.

"I see... So basically, thanks to Suzuna, we can now call on another, new power of yours, right?"

"There are aspects to my divinity which I cannot control. Indeed, I cannot predict what would occur should your devotion levels rise, or what phenomena that would catalyze. Neither can I foretell what potential capabilities I might acquire once you have assembled all my parts, for I have lost all my memories on these matters."

Lost—that reminds me of when Ariadne called herself a "discarded existence."

"I don't know if we can bring back your memories, but maybe we can help restore some of your powers as we grow... At least, I hope so."

"Should attending your party stimulate change within me, I would gratefully recompense the favor."

Recently, I'd started to notice Murakumo and Alphecca gradually expressing a greater range of emotion; now it seemed a similar shift had begun to soften Ariadne compared to when we met.

"Atobe, what's your call? Want to follow the Oracle's advice?"

"Yes, let's head east. Be on your guard, everyone. Let's go."

""""Okay!""""

"Arf!" Barking her agreement with the others, Cion made for the front line with Seraphina.

I activated Morale Support once, and Igarashi's shoulders seemed to relax. Abandoning her fearful crouch, she straightened up tall, then turned around to face me, striking a powerful pose as if to say, *I'm okay now*.

"Listen up, everyone—I'm going to use Mist of Bravery, just to be on the safe

side,” she announced.

“Ooh, bustin’ out your sexy perfume?!”

“I-it’s not *that* kind of skill...”

Looking somewhat embarrassed, Igarashi nevertheless activated Mist of Bravery. A plume of vapor enveloped our party before fading away, leaving us with a one-time buffer against Fear.

Wondering whether monsters capable of inflicting the paralyzing status would appear and validate our hunch, we kept walking around the lake, the grasses at our feet steadily growing taller and taller.

“Whoaaa!” Misaki yelped. “...I—I think I just saw some, like, bird fly off. What *was* that?”

“Misaki, want to hold my hand?” Suzuna kindly offered.

“Yeshhh. Kyoukie-poo, wanna get in on this?”

“Y-you know...you really should take this a little more seriously. We are in District Five, after—”

But before Igarashi could finish her sentence, a sense of dread that was equally shocking yet impossible to ignore shook me to my core.

Not even Theresia’s Scout Range Extension 1 or my Hawk Eyes caught this... No way it’s this hard to stop monsters in District Five labyrinths from attacking first!

◆Current Status◆

> UNKNOWN ENEMY activated COLD HAND

> THERESIA activated LOOKOUT 1

> THERESIA activated SHADOW STEP → Evaded COLD HAND

“.....!”

“S-seriously, what is that...?!”

Leaving nothing but her afterimage behind, Theresia dodged the attack—one unleashed by a hazy, half-translucent figure.

“Madoka, stay hidden!” I quickly ordered.

“O-okay...!”

Bringing up the tail end of our group, Madoka activated Hide as I asked. My skills automatically applied only to the eight people in my party. Since Madoka was the ninth member of our group, I’d have to use Other Assist for my support to reach her, and the inevitable time lag could mean all the difference in a pinch. In that case, I figured it was better to have her hide and wait for a moment when she could contribute to the battle in some way to gain experience as well.

“Atobe!”

“.....!”

A chill ran through my body, making every last hair stand on end. I instinctively jumped up at Igarashi’s warning. The very next instant, that mysterious, semi-transparent *something* shot out of the ground in the very spot where I’d been standing. Desperate to shake off this mysterious foe, I activated the power in my Hannya’s Greaves.

◆Current Status◆

- > UNKNOWN ENEMY activated BODY SWAP
- > ARIHITO activated YOSHITSUNE’S LEAP → Evaded BODY SWAP
- > UNKNOWN ENEMY revealed to be ICE REMNANT A

Kicking through the air, I jumped away mere seconds before the half-translucent mist sliced through the last spot I’d been. Based on the name my license listed, I deduced it must be a phantom-type monster.

Body Swap... Don’t tell me it was trying to possess me? What kind of sick joke is that...?!

“Watch your step, everyone! It attacks from the ground! And it’s not just one... Misaki, jump—now!”

“J-jump...?! Eeek!”

“Arooo!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ICE REMNANT B activated BODY SWAP
- > CION activated EMERGENCY WITHDRAWAL → Target: MISAKI
- > MISAKI evaded BODY SWAP

Cion raced over to Misaki, caught her gracefully mid-jump, and sprinted away. The next instant, a second Ice Remnant shot out of the ground to attack.

“They’re not just under the ground! Theresia!”

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

- > UNKNOWN ENEMY activated HARROWING BREEZE
- > THERESIA activated SHADOW STEP → Evaded HARROWING BREEZE

A phantom silhouette suddenly materialized behind Theresia and blew some sort of gas toward her—she managed to evade it, but since she’d already activated Shadow Step once before, her speed drastically fell.

Harrowing...I’m pretty sure that means scary in English. I guess this kind of enemy is gonna try to get us with classic ghost status ailments.

“Not on my watch!” Elitia shouted.

◆Current Status◆

- > ELITIA activated SONIC BLADE
- > ELITIA activated SLASH RIPPER → No effect on UNKNOWN ENEMY

“Grrh...!” Elitia groaned in frustration.

Physical attacks wouldn’t work on ghostly monsters; Elitia almost certainly knew that, but she’d slashed out to intercept the monster from doubling down on Theresia.

And yet, the moment the enemy evaded her attack, a blurry mist enveloped Elitia’s blade.

◆Current Status◆

> UNKNOWN ENEMY activated INVISIBLE SPELL → Sealed ELITIA's BLOSSOM BLADE

“Th-that thing... It put a lock on my skill...!” Elitia cried.

The monster had taken her most powerful skill out of the equation before she even had the chance to use it. Were enemies that struck with such devastating skills at first sight the norm here? If so, we evidently had undeniable menaces lurking behind every corner.

How can we turn this around...? Ah, maybe magic bullets...!

Jumping through the air once more with Yoshitsune's Leap, I spun around and aimed my slingshot at the blurry figure that had just slipped through Elitia's attack.

“Stop right there!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT: STUN → Hit UNKNOWN ENEMY

> UNKNOWN ENEMY revealed to be ALTARGEIST

> ALTARGEIST was Stunned → Stun state extended

So magic bullets work...but they won't make a real dent against a District Five enemy. And the Stun state will hold for only a second...!

As soon as my feet touched the ground, I whipped out my license to check what information it had on the monsters. These three seemed to be the only ones nearby, but I didn't find all the answers to my questions about their individual resistances.

◆Monsters Encountered◆

ICE REMNANT A

Level 10

In Combat

Impervious to Physical Attacks

Weakness Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

ICE REMNANT B

Level 10

In Combat

Impervious to Physical Attacks

Weakness Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

ALTARGEIST

Level 11

In Combat

Impervious to Physical Attacks

Weakness Unknown

Dropped Loot: ???

Weakness unknown... Physical attacks won't hurt it, but we still don't know what attributes can—Wait.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated HAWK EYES → Increased ability to monitor the situation

Hawk Eyes didn't solve the mystery of the monsters' weak spots, but it did provide one vital insight: Our foes did not include Suzuna, who stood at Misaki's side, among their targets.

"Suzuna, use Sacred Words on me!"

Shrine Maidens had a plethora of skills to deal with the phantasmic. With nothing but pop culture as a reference, I had the impression sacred powers were the best tools for dealing with unwanted ghosts.

However, our enemies trained their sights on Suzuna the very moment I called out to her. They had apparently tried to avoid harming her but would still try to thwart her if she made a move. The two Ice Remnants held off anyone who tried to approach Suzuna while the third ghostly apparition homed in on her directly.

“Suzuna...!” Igarashi cried.

◆Current Status◆

> ALTARGEIST activated RUSTY ERASION

> KYOUKA activated MIRAGE STEP → No effect against RUSTY ERASION

“...Ah...!” Igarashi yelped in pain.

“Igarashi...!”

“Kyouka!” screamed Suzuna.

The nebulous ghoul turned a shade of sickly pink—then, completely undeterred by her evasion skill, passed right through her body.

◆Current Status◆

> KYOUKA fell victim to special status ailment: ?Ghastly Plague

“Krrh...uh... Aaah...”

What’s happening to her...? No, first we’ve gotta focus on taking these damn things down...!

Its rotting, peachy pallor next taking on a purple hue, the ghost set its sights on Suzuna. Before it could attack, I got in range to receive her Sacred Words.

“Holy symbols that repel the wicked, grant me your power!”

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated SACRED WORDS → Added HOLY attribute to ARIHITO’s weapons

As soon as Suzuna’s spell left her lips, white letters surfaced on all my

weapons. Then, the instant I reloaded my slingshot, the magic I'd expended in the previous shot returned. Thanks to Recovery Support 2, everyone in front of me also benefited from the same replenishing effect.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated TACTICAL RELOAD → All party members recovered magic

As the skill restored all the magic points I'd used in my last Force Shot: Stun, I could feel it transmit the same benefit to all my party members as if I were literally reloading all their magic.

"Arihito...! Tell us which one you want us to target...!"

"You got it... Elitia, Theresia, let's do this!"

"Okay!"

".....!"

"Arihitooo, I'm goin' in, too!" Misaki chimed in.

Seraphina had her hands full antagonizing one of the Ice Remnants to keep it focused on her and away from us, so she couldn't join in on this combo.

Misaki whipped out her Jester's Wildcards as soon as she slid off Cion's back. Drawing back my slingshot, I saw the magic bullet sparkle with unusual, bright white energy—then, focusing on the one enemy Hawk Eyes illuminated for me, I loosed the shot.

"Cooperation Support...Long-Range Attacks!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated COOPERATION SUPPORT 1 and ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT: STUN

> ARIHITO activated COMMAND SUPPORT → Now possible to guide party members' targets

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT: STUN → Hit ALTARGEIST

Weak spot attack

Inflicted Stun status

Combined attack stage 1

> ELITIA activated SONIC BLADE

> ELITIA activated DOUBLE SLASH → Hit ALTARGEIST

Weak spot attack

Stun state extended

Combined attack stage 2

> ELITIA activated an additional attack → Hit ALTARGEIST

Weak spot attack

Stun state extended

“OHHH... OHHH...”

Thanks to Suzuna’s Sacred Words, the Stun status effect maintained its strength and prevented the enemy from hitting us with a counterattack—and our combo attack wasn’t done, either.

“.....!”

But just as Theresia went to add to the chain, the Altargeist began flickering.

◆Current Status◆

> ALTARGEIST activated ALTERNATE → Transformed to SPLIT DECISION status

Sensing the combination meant nothing but bad news, the Altargeist squeezed in an evasion skill—and split in two before Theresia’s eyes. If she missed her next strike, the chain of attacks would break and put us at risk of counterattacks. Meanwhile, the status ailment the Altargeist had inflicted on Igarashi kept her out of commission.

And yet Theresia did not back down. Brilliant light exploded from her hands; I could’ve sworn I saw blue butterflies fluttering around them.

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated BUTTERFLY FROLIC → Increased number of attacks

> THERESIA activated AZURE SLASH → Hit ALTARGEIST 2 times

Weak spot attack

Stun state extended

Combined attack stage 3

> ALTARGEIST was Burned

“—!!”

“OHHH...!”

“D-do your thiiiing!”

Graceful as a dancer, Theresia unleashed two virtually simultaneous flaming blue slashes to keep the chain going. As the Altargeist recoiled in pain, Misaki flung her cards at it and gave a battle cry.

◆Current Status◆

> MISAKI activated ICE JOKER → Angered ALTARGEIST

Inflicted ALTARGEIST with ice attribute weakness

Stun state extended

Combined attack stage 4

> Combined attack FROLIC, DOUBLE, AZURE, BURN, JOKER → Inflicted additional damage

Burn intensified

> ALTARGEIST activated REVENANT REGRETS → Canceled status ailments

Obtained extra time

> ALTARGEIST prepared to activate SARCOPHAGUS

I saw two very different scenes unfold. In one, my friends and I rejoiced moments after defeating the Altargeist. But in the other—we were still as statues on the lake's shore; every last one of us was dead.

“Begone, ghost...!”

◆Current Status◆

> SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD

> ICE REMNANT A activated COLD HAND

> SERAPHINA activated COUNTER TACKLE → Hit ICE REMNANT A

Weak spot attack

ICE REMNANT A was Stunned

> ICE REMNANT B activated QUICK SPELL for ALTARGEIST → Shortened period until SARCOPHAGUS can be activated

Seraphina slammed her aura-covered shield into Ice Remnant A, sending it flying; however, she could not stop the remaining ghoul. But I'd already made my move, preparing to take full advantage of the new weak spot Misaki's wild cards had carved out for us. I activated Tactical Reload, drew my slingshot as fast as I could, and fired.

“Freeze!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated TACTICAL RELOAD → All party members recovered magic

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT: FREEZE

> ALTARGEIST activated SARCOPHAGUS → Sacrificed 2 ICE REMNANTS

Only a split second separated my attack and the Altargeist's—and cemented the winner of this battle. The ghoul's flickering frame was engulfed in an unearthly aura; the next moment, the specter began emitting gray gas.

But then:

◆Current Status◆

> FORCE SHOT: FREEZE hit ALTARGEIST

Critical hit

2 weak spot attacks

ALTARGEIST was completely Frozen

ALTARGEIST was Stunned

> SARCOPHAGUS activation canceled

> Defeated 2 ICE REMNANTS

> Seal on ELITIA lifted

Made it...just in time...!

Blessed by the Holy attribute and powered by my frost stone, my slingshot's magic bullets froze the incorporeal monster into an icy statue, a blurry mass about my height. Then the two Ice Remnants evaporated into thin air like lifting fog, dropping two magic stones to the ground.

I guess the Altargeist was sucking out all their energy to make its final move.

"Haaah, haaaah...!"

"Are you okay, Igarashi...?!"

"Don't... Atobe, stay away from me...!"

"E-easy for you to say...! Suzu, can't you exorcise Kyouka or something to heal her?" Misaki frantically asked.

That's when it hit me. "...That's right! Suzuna, that skill might just work...!"

One of her available skills, Purge, had the power to reduce the effects of any status ailments that constrained someone's movements, if I remembered correctly.

"It's a gamble, but I have a feeling it should work against a phantom-type monster's status ailment...", I said.

"Okay, I'll try it...!"

She readily agreed and went to acquire the skill—but then...

Our heads all turned in the same direction. Unbeknownst to us amid the dank air that blew over the lakeshore, something had appeared—a mysterious, sword-wielding figure clad in tattered rags, its face hidden beneath a skull-like mask.

“My license doesn’t say we’ve encountered a monster, but...,” I started.

No matter how you sliced it, the vibes that thing sent our way were anything but friendly.

Clasping her Scarlet Emperor, Elitia prepared to engage in battle. “Looks like it’s not going to let us past without a fight... On your guard, everyone.”

“Cion, take Igarashi somewhere safe. Suzuna, please, try that Purge out on her,” I instructed, but the dangers to our party if we lingered too long divided from one another weighed heavily on my mind—we had to get out of here as soon as possible.

At this point, only Seraphina, Elitia, Theresia, Misaki, and I could stand to fight. I felt bad for leaving Madoka hanging in her hiding spot, but I wanted to keep her free to help us recover after the battle. We stood five against one, but the unsettling stance this skull-masked figure took told me all too clearly we could not let our guard down against it.

Part IV: The Skull Scarecrow

Based on what we'd seen so far, there was a good chance this enemy belonged to a similar phantasmic genre. Elitia, having come to the same conclusion, called out to Suzuna before she left for Igarashi's side.

"Suzuna, could you cast Sacred Words on my blade?"

"Yes, of course."

Suzuna activated Sacred Words, prepared to bless Elitia's sword with the Holy attribute just in case. But then—

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated SACRED WORDS → Target: ELITIA

Ineffective on cursed weapons

—the white inscription rose to the blade's surface, only to fade and vanish without a trace.

"...I'm so sorry, Ellie. Let me try again..."

"No, it's fine... This just means we've been on the right track. If I want to attack ghosts with this blade, I'll have to rely on Arihito's support."

"Yeah, you got it," I said. "The Sacred Words should still be working on me, so I think I'll be able to support you."

"Mr. Arihito, allow me to deflect the first blow and gauge the situation..."

◆Current Status◆

> ?SCARECROW activated LOWER STANCE → Evasion rate and probability of landing critical hit increased

"...It appears to employ a type of swordsmanship I've never seen before," Seraphina noted cautiously.

At first glance, the flimsy way the Scarecrow lifted its sword made it seem extremely vulnerable. But it had activated a skill—and that meant something hid up its ragged sleeve.

“I hate to say it, but... looking at this thing reminds me of *that...*,” Elitia said, her face tight with nerves.

She was right; the skull mask inevitably evoked the image of the grim reaper, which in turn dredged up memories of the Merciless Guillotine’s devastating skill that stripped away your soul with a single swipe—Soul-Stealing Scythe.

“All righty, then... Arihito, I’m goin’ in with a Lucky Seven! Might not work, but it can’t hurt!”

Fishing out two dice, Misaki placed one on each of her thumbs and flipped them in the air, catching them between her fingers as they fell. In that same flash, I shot Theresia a look.

“Theresia, I’ve got a favor to ask. When Elitia goes in for the attack...”

“.....”

“And the winning number is...!”

◆Current Status◆

- > MISAKI activated DICE TRICK
- > MISAKI activated LUCKY SEVEN 1 → Success
- > ?SCARECROW’S status ailment resistance fell

She did it...!

“All right, everyone, I’ll get us rolling! Watch out for how it times its attacks!”

“““Okay!”””

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT: FREEZE → Hit ?SCARECROW
- ?SCARECROW was Frozen

> ?SCARECROW activated THE QUIET LIFE → Canceled Frozen status

Recovered status ailment resistance

The Scarecrow froze, only to melt the very next second. Its body shone so brightly, you'd think it was a bright, sunny day instead of this hazy twilight.

Looks like all the monsters have skills to cancel status ailments... We need something else to keep the Frozen status going long enough so it can't undo it...!

"Haaaaaah!"

"Seraphina, I'll support you!"

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT: STUN

> SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD and DEFENSE FORCE

> SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Target: ?SCARECROW

> ?SCARECROW activated WILLOW WIND → Deflected SHIELD SLAM

"Wha—?!" Seraphina blurted out in surprise.

The one-legged Scarecrow lithely twisted itself like a wispy willow branch to deflect all the force with which Seraphina had charged at it, shield readied to attack.

"Ahhh!"

Slowed by the weight of her shield as she tried to turn on the spot, Seraphina let out a spirited cry. Even that would not help her face the Scarecrow before its next move.

"Get away from her...!"

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated SONIC BLADE

> ?SCARECROW canceled attack

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE → Target: ?SCARECROW

> ?SCARECROW activated WILD SWORD DANCE → Target: BLOSSOM BLADE

“Ngh...!”

Elitia shot toward the Scarecrow, instantly closing the distance between them and unleashing the first of her multistrike barrage. The masked specter repurposed the attack it had meant for Seraphina as defense, whipping the sword it wielded so loosely directly at her blade to drive it back.

“Raaaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA continued BLOSSOM BLADE

> ?SCARECROW continued WILD SWORD DANCE → Target: BLOSSOM BLADE

One after another Elitia rained down an onslaught of slashes at the Scarecrow, but the grim straw man alternated between the swords in either of its hands and rebuffed every one of her twelve strikes, including the extra attacks activated by her Dexterity Gauntlets. Cold light shone from the hollow eyes in its skull mask. Elitia stopped, as always momentarily unable to command her body into action after finishing her Blossom Blade.

◆Current Status◆

> ?SCARECROW activated VORPAL WEAPON → Unlocked ★PILGRIM'S
DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Its swords are transforming... Is that even possible...?!

The two blades in the Scarecrow's hands began to transform—one melded into the other to create a thick longsword, which then began to vibrate and emit a low moan.

We'd never survive even one strike from this sword.

My worry seemed to transmit telepathically to Theresia, who had completely concealed her presence as she patiently awaited her time to strike.

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated SNEAK ATTACK → Damage to ?SCARECROW doubled

> THERESIA activated BUTTERFLY FROLIC → Increased number of attacks

> THERESIA activated AZURE SLASH → Hit ?SCARECROW 1 time
Critical hit

?SCARECROW was Stunned

“.....!”

With her Active Stealth, Theresia secured the perfect spot directly behind the Scarecrow and unleashed what should have been a series of decisive, deadly blows. And yet the straw man reacted just in time, dipping and dodging every slash Theresia threw at it so quickly, she left afterimages in her wake. Nevertheless, and with great effort, her last blow found its mark.

“.....”

Blazing brightly with the blue flame stone's fire, her sword left a gash in the Scarecrow's mask.

◆Current Status◆

> ?SCARECROW deactivated VORPAL WEAPON

> ?SCARECROW abandoned battle stance

From the looks of it, Theresia's slash hadn't deeply injured the Scarecrow. Even so, it split its moaning double-edged sword back into two, sheathed them both, and silently stared at us.

“...A-Arihitooo... Think it's throwing in the towel...?”

“If it's really stopped fighting...there must be a reason. Maybe because Theresia landed a hit?”

The hostility we'd all felt deep in our bones had disappeared entirely. Still tightly clutching the Scarlet Emperor, Elitia glared at the straw man. But faced

with an enemy who now seemed to bear us no ill will, she eventually lowered her blade.

“...My Blossom Blade couldn’t... If I don’t activate Red Eye, I...,” she muttered quietly after returning her sword to its scabbard.

The Scarecrow had rebuffed Elitia’s most powerful attack, rejecting fifteen slashes total with only two blades.

Worried how Elitia would react to the hard truth her sword clearly didn’t work on all monsters in District Five, I called out to her.

“Elitia...”

At that, she turned around and smiled, looking much less discouraged than I’d feared.

“I’ll have to think about it later. Even Kyouka had a rough time... I need to get stronger—but I already knew that. This only drove that point home.”

“...I see. You’re really tough, Elitia.”

“...Don’t go complimenting me when I just admitted I’m too weak. I’m not the type to grow with undue praise, Arihito.”

Suzuna approached as we spoke. Purge had evidently had some effect on Igarashi, who lay limply on Cion’s back, apparently out cold.

“Arihito, I managed to slightly alleviate Kyouka’s status ailment, but I couldn’t entirely expel it.”

“Thanks, Suzuna. We’re better off preparing as many antidotes to status ailments as possible, so I’m sure Purge will come in handy again soon.”

“Arihito, should I hand out some medicine to everyone?” Madoka piped up.

“Yeah, but can you give me just a... Hmmm?”

◆Current Status◆

> MADOKA grew to level 5

“Ah... R-right, while you were all fighting so bravely, I gave the frozen monster a Permanence potion. The next thing I knew, I got this huge bump in experience

points...”

“Permanence... I didn’t know such a thing existed.”

“I-I’m sorry, I know I should’ve asked, but I thought it might come in handy and bought it one day when I was waiting at home.”

◆Inferior P_{ERMANENCE} Potion◆

> Potion that applies the same effect as the skill P_{ERMANENCE}.

> Extends the target’s status ailment in correspondence with the user’s skill level. Only applies to certain status ailments.

> Success rate increases the more the target’s vitality decreases. Normally succeeds at a very low rate.

I had Madoka hand me the potion so I could take a better look. The label marked it an “inferior” product, but it seemed to work quite well as long as it activated successfully.

“I’m really sorry. I know I should’ve asked for permission, but it’s just a junk potion so I thought it might be okay...”

“Don’t be. I was just hoping we could get our hands on something like that,” I told her. “A potion that works like a skill... Do you know how these are made?”

“Y-yes. Apparently, you can only use potions to activate certain types of magical skills, and you need to have someone who can use Magic Medicine Creation, like a Pharmacist or Alchemist, to make it for you.”

“I see... So they sell these kinds of special medicines as junk items, huh?”

This potion looked like it had one more dose left. Now that I knew Madoka had gained so much experience by using this kind of item during an expedition, I figured it would be a good idea to keep an eye out for and buy all sorts of medicines or tools she could handle.

“Do buy anything else like this you see whenever you can... But I guess I didn’t need to tell you that. Thanks for being on top of this, Madoka. You’re a great help.”

“Thank you so much! I’ll do my best!” She instantly perked up. “...Ah! A-

Arihito...”

The Scarecrow was pointing at us—no, something *behind* us.

“The Altargeist...?”

That something: the frozen Altargeist. Its finger still extended toward the icy statue, the Scarecrow looked in our direction.

“Is that somehow special? Is that why you stopped fighting us...?”

Surprisingly, the Scarecrow nodded in response—only to then shake its head. The mixed message almost threw me for a loop, but I tried my hand at interpreting it anyway: *Yes, but also no*.

“Does it want that ice statue...? What for?”

“...If you promise not to attack us anymore, I’m open to negotiate,” I said. “Is that what you want?”

The Scarecrow nodded.

I’d been planning to take the frozen ghoul back with us to see if Ceres could do anything with its materials. But maybe this Scarecrow could unveil other details about this labyrinth, though there was no telling how valuable that information could prove. If nothing else, I was very curious.

“...Hey, everyone, do you mind if I say yes and hand over the frozen monster?”

“I don’t mind, but... How exactly is it going to carry that thing?” Elitia wondered.

“Currently, I do not sense any hostility from this Scarecrow,” Seraphina noted. “I’d like to believe it doesn’t intend to trick us, however... I apologize—I cannot say for certain.”

The others hesitated a bit, too, but soon enough, they agreed to let the straw man take it. The Scarecrow approached the frozen monster, plucked it off the ground as if it weighed almost nothing, and lightly tossed it over its shoulder. Then, after casting a pointed glance our way, the Scarecrow turned its back to us and started strolling toward the east, away from the lake.

“Mr. Arihito, what should we do? It appears to be requesting we follow...”

“...I can only hope it's not leading us to a trap. Seraphina, could you hold that thought for a moment?”

I walked the short distance over to Cion to check on the now conscious Igarashi. Though not exactly her usual self, I was relieved to see the same woman who had warned me not to approach her lift herself up and smile.

“I'm all right... Suzu helped calm me down a bit. I'm sorry; all I did was slow the party down this time...”

“Please don't be. I'm just glad you're okay. This battle proved the monsters in District Five are formidable, but it also showed us we can, in fact, defeat them.”

“That's true... You guys were incredible out there. I promise I'll hold my own in the next battle...”

The ?Ghastly Plague had not relinquished its grip on Igarashi. If we didn't find a way to completely lift it, we might have to face the Simian Lord without her.

...I knew delving into a District Five Labyrinth would be risky, but I guess we just have to deal with each problem as we face it.

Theresia and Elitia recovered the magic stones the two Ice Remnants had dropped, then handed them to Madoka for safekeeping. Our eyes peeled for danger, we followed the Scarecrow as it headed toward a grove to the east.

Part V: The Lakeside Hermit

Not long after we ventured into the woods, a layer of thick fog made it impossible to see anything. Just as I started to worry if we'd ever make it out the other end, the mist lifted, and we stepped past the last of the trees.

"...A house...in a labyrinth?" Seraphina noted quizzically from her spot at the helm of our group. She may have been the only one to voice her confusion, but we were all in the same boat.

We'd come upon a wooden cottage complete with a thatched roof and a chimney puffing out wisps of smoke—or rather, fog. Clearly, this must have made that haze we'd trekked through.

◆Current Status◆

- > Raiding previously undiscovered terrain
- > Probability of encountering monsters: Extremely low
- > Presence of area effects: Not equipped to determine

Previously undiscovered terrain—someone's obviously living here, though. I guess sometimes that doesn't matter.

After setting the Altargeist down near the cottage, the Scarecrow went up to stand by the door.

"Ah!" Madoka squeaked. "Arihito, i-it's opening...!"

The door creaked open. As rearguard, I usually brought up the tail end of our band, but now Misaki and Madoka were cowering behind me. Suzuna looked tempted to join them but in the end opted against it; more of a fellow rearguard than a halfback, she seemed to be trying to stay in formation in front of me. I appreciated her dedication to her role, but I also felt a little guilty it made her the odd one out.

"...Is that a little girl...?" Elitia whispered.

“Can’t say I hate the sound of that, but I’m afraid I’ve got years and years on you, young lady.”

“.....?! ”

We’d all seen the cottage inhabitant head toward the door, but the next thing we knew, a petite figure in a tricorn hat was standing right next to Elitia.

She looks...so much like Ceres. Does that mean she’s a jade, too...?

This girl’s facial features were similar to Ceres’s, but unique touches such as the unusual face paint and her finely braided hair were stark differences. She also wore clothing similar to those of equatorial indigenous populations that left some parts of her body exposed, and she topped that all off with a cape. I wondered what kind of profession she had. Her appearance made me think of a shaman or something along those lines; if that hunch proved right, it meant she might have something in common with a Shrine Maiden.

“Hmmm, didn’t draw your blade, I see. Looks like this colored weapon doesn’t manipulate you as it pleases, does it?”

“...You know what this sword is?” Elitia asked cautiously.

“That I do. Although perhaps I should say I’m an expert in all such matters,” the girl replied, then walked over to me.

As petite as she was, I assumed that, like Ceres, she probably belonged to a race that looked younger than their actual age.

“My name is Arihito Atobe. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m Lynée, just your friendly neighborhood eccentric living in a labyrinth cottage. I thank you for accepting my invitation,” she said, then extended her right hand; I reached mine out in return. She did indeed seem friendly, but I had to get to the bottom of why the Scarecrow had attacked us. “We have much to discuss, but I’d say your warrior requires immediate attention.”

“You can cure her Ghastly Plague?”

“Right, let me shed some light on my profession. I am a Witch Doctor... sometimes also called a faith healer, which means many of my skills deal with curses or the phantasmic,” she explained, then approached the frozen

Altargeist and pulled what looked like a piece of paper out of her cape.

“Is that...a talisman?”

“Suzu, don’t you have something like that, too?” Misaki asked.

“That’s right—you were holding on to the Ghost-Warding Grand Charm. That must be why those monsters avoided you at first,” I deduced.

Evidently, you could unknowingly benefit during battle from the special effects imbued in certain equipment just by having it on you. It would be great if we could get other accessories with similar ghost-warding effects to help us stand our ground against phantom-type monsters, but given that Suzuna’s Sacred Words proved so effective, we were probably better off handing any such armor or charms to her.

“...Well, if this isn’t fate, I don’t know what is. I never expected to see this Altargeist appear again. Was it drawn to all the ladies in your party, or maybe your multiple cursed members...?” Lynée mused. “No, in this case, I’d bet the former more likely.”

“Lynée, what are you trying to say...?”

“I mean, others might have come across this ghoul, but you accomplished an incredible feat capturing it in ice it like this. By all rights, freezing a ghost should be impossible. And yet you succeeded and did me a great favor in the process.”

Her wording suggested the Scarecrow had brought the Altargeist here under her orders. The phantom must have held great value for her, or perhaps she and it had unfinished business. I hadn’t completely worked her out yet, but it felt safe to assume she had, in fact, invited us with amicable intent.

“Young Arihito, I imagine you might harvest not a few resources from this Altargeist should you take it back with you, but I’d like to seal it away in this talisman if at all possible. I’m almost certain it would also help control the Ghastly Plague on your friend.”

“If you defeat it, will that lift the status ailment...?”

“Not defeat it; I’m going to seal it away,” she clarified. “My skills allow me to enter spirits into my service, and I can also confine them to talismans like this.

Once done, the talisman can be used to forge spiritual tools.”

“Spiritual tools... I’ve never heard of those before.”

Lynée grinned slyly, almost mischievously, at my unreserved reply. Only a moment later, though, she seemed to remember something and her expression darkened. “...I fear this Altargeist will break through its icy prison before long. If you entrust it to me, I pledge my assistance will be yours whenever you need it. I have no doubt it will serve you.”

“That would be wonderful, thank you. We actually came here to ask for your advice. You’re welcome to the Altargeist, of course, but please let us know if there’s anything else you need.”

“Advice...? Ahhh. I swear, I don’t know what to do with that child. If she’s that near, she could’ve at least dropped by.”

“Child...? What child? Ah, did I jump the gun there?” Misaki apparently hadn’t connected the dots yet, but I was almost certain Lynée was talking about Ceres.

“...By the magic vested in me, I hereby command you to my service. Now, sleep, rest, lay yourself upon the ever-silent river and entrust your body and soul to the ancestral lands of your father and mother.”

“OHHHH...OHHH...”

With a warped, twisted howl, the frozen Altargeist evaporated into mist, then got sucked into the slip of paper Lynée held between two fingers.

◆Current Status◆

> LYNÉE activated SEAL SPIRIT → Created ★MISTY WISPS OF SPECTRAL
CHANGE CHARM

“...At long last, it is done. Ten years I searched for this spirit. I nearly gave up all hope.”

“Ten years...! Have you been living in the labyrinth all this time?”

“I suppose so, though I can’t take credit for building this cottage. I simply exorcised the spirits from what was already standing and moved in.” No matter how lightly she spoke about it, she must have had a very important reason to

spend ten whole years hunting down the Altargeist. “...Now, you’d best have your warrior maiden hold on to this.”

“Are you sure? Weren’t you waiting all that time to make this talisman...?”

“I simply wanted to seal the Altargeist away with my own two hands. It may not sound like much after someone else trapped it for me, but...let’s just say I needed to set things right.”

She made to hand me the charm but stopped halfway as if a thought had suddenly occurred to her. “You may be her party member, but I can’t exactly leave this job to a man. That’s it; I’ll take that responsibility as a Witch Doctor and apply it for her.”

“...?” Puzzled, I said, “I’m sure I could hand it to her without issue...”

“A-Arihito...,” Suzuna nervously cut in. “...With charms...you, um...you need to put them...somewhere they’ll stick to your skin...”

“...Ah! Ahhh, right. Now I see what you mean.”

“I confess I’m curious to see how it’s done,” Seraphina admitted. “I’ve never equipped one myself.”

Clearly, she hadn’t yet gotten the point. That said, she could very well wind up equipping one herself one day, so it could only help to learn.



The little hut had two small beds, but Lynée told us she always slept alone; the Scarecrow, it seemed, did not need a bed.

Igarashi was in that spare bed behind a rattan blind as Lynée applied the charm to her. With this type of charm, you apparently had to either tie it somewhere around your body or stick it on with a strip of what looked like seaweed that peeled off easily.

“S-sorry...I understand this is a medical treatment, but I feel a little exposed...”

“There’s no hard rule on where best to place the talisman, and it can peel off as you move around no matter where you choose. If it comes loose during an expedition, you can use a piece of string to tie it tight around you.”

Personally, I thought there must be more convenient methods to equip the charm, but Lynée shot that down by explaining it was best to do these things the traditional way.

I appreciated her inviting me into the cottage with the others, although between the fragrant aroma of something resembling incense and the extra-high concentration of women per square foot, I couldn't help but wonder if I really belonged there.

"Arihiiiito, wanna guess where we stuck it?" Misaki teased.

"No, not in the least..."

"Oh sure, he says that, then comes and takes a peek...", she added wryly. "Whoa! I thought I was in for something PG, but this is totally an R-rated scene...!"

"D-don't be silly, Misaki. This is all part of the treatment... Right, Lynée?"

"I don't see what the fuss is about. It's not uncommon for women in warrior positions to develop defined abdominal muscles. Though in fairness to the young lass, yours *are* quite defined."

Misaki and Lynée seemed to be intentionally choosing the most suggestive language to get to me, but I knew Igarashi didn't exactly have washboard abs. I was starting to get a six-pack myself, probably because I wound up moving around a lot for a rearguard.

◆★Misty Wisps of Spectral Change Charm◆

- > Suppresses up to PASSION 3.
- > Increases maximum magic.
- > User can activate LUSTY RATION. May damage Charm upon activation.

Evidently, trapping a phantom-type monster in an item could at times produce a starred piece of equipment. Charms and talismans found in labyrinths were also apparently made this way through skills like Seal Spirit or something similar like Spiritual Tool Creation.

“Now, I’ve affixed the seal to her body. Make sure it stays there for about a week,” Lynée instructed. “Ailments like this Ghastly Plague will disappear on their own with time, but you need to keep a suppressant on or the symptoms will return.”

“Y-yes, ma’am. By the way, could I ask you about the charm’s effects...?”

I showed the Witch Doctor my license. Just by watching Igarashi, I could tell that the ailment affected her ability to move, but what was this Passion 3?

And yet, though I’d only asked an honest question, Lynée looked at me as if with pity, then climbed up onto a stool and patted my head.

“Arhito’s gettin’ some lovin’ pats over here... Seraphina, Kyouka, is it just me, or are we witnessing the introduction of a new rival?”

“Th-that’s ridiculous...,” Igarashi protested from behind the blind. “A-anyway, what exactly are you doing, Lynée?”

“I doubt such behavior would be appropriate for me as I am younger than Mr. Arihito,” Seraphina added, sounding somewhat disappointed, though I couldn’t fathom why. I wished Lynée would just tell me what that status ailment was already.

The learned Witch Doctor gestured for me to lend her an ear. Perhaps she meant to speak so only I could hear—but she could have just as easily wanted to tease me.

Part VI: A Ray of Hope

As it turned out, Lynée did seem to enjoy watching me get flustered. Finally satisfied, she explained, “It does exactly what’s written there, though ‘Passion’ can give a more emotional impression... Simply put, it refers to sexual excitement or lust.”

“...L-lust...

I had considered the possibility of something along those lines but found myself at a loss for words when my hunch was actually corroborated.

“You can also treat the ailment without the Altargeist charm, but that depends greatly on the relationship between the affected person and their party members.”

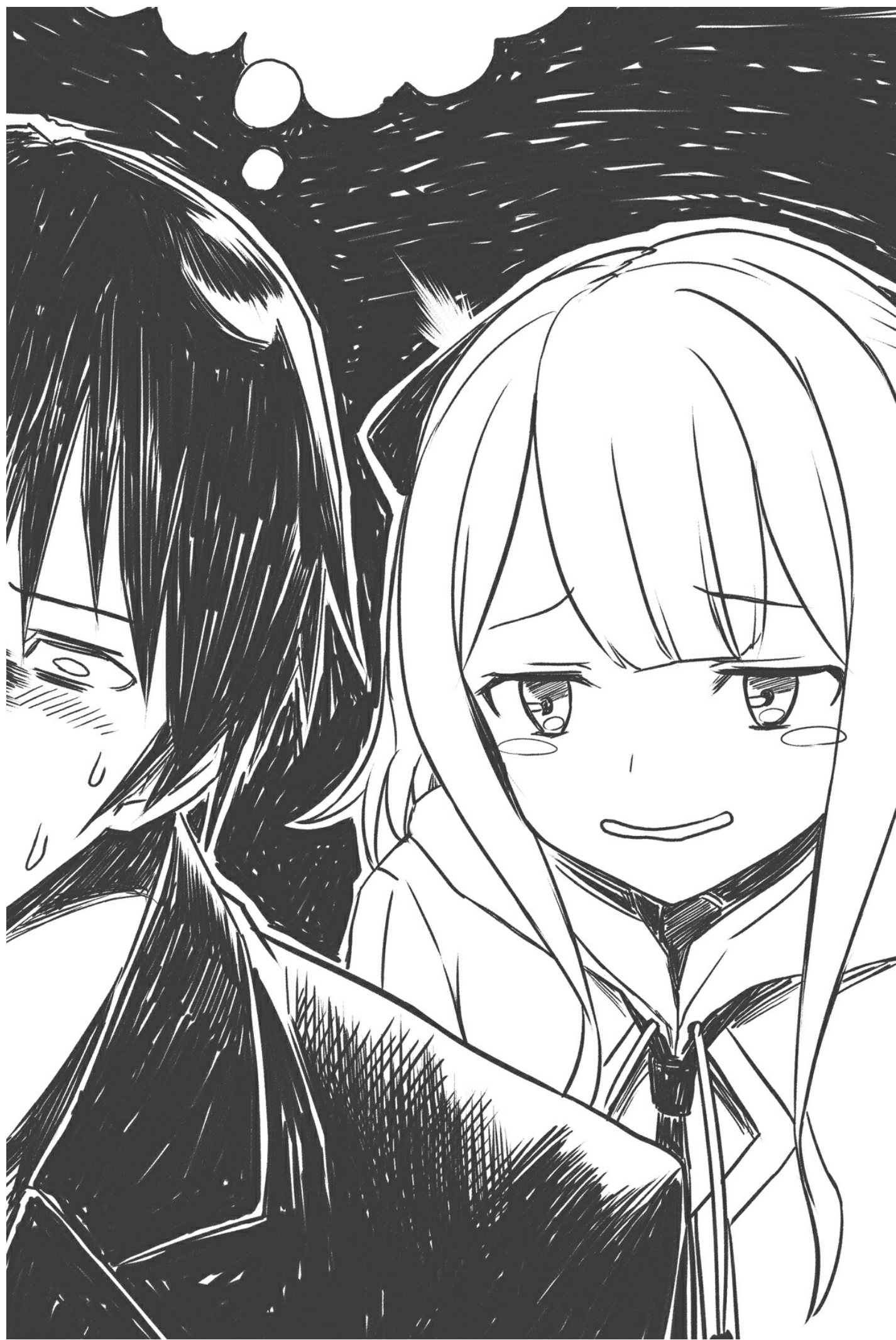
“...Looks like our best bet is to keep it on for a week, then.”

“Heh-heh... I get such a kick out of watching you youngsters blush so much.” Ceres had told us she was 115 years old, and even so, Lynée called her a child. We must’ve all seemed impossibly young in her eyes, but I still felt a little unnerved. “...That aside, since we’ve managed to control your lady warrior’s symptoms, perhaps it’s time we get to the real reason you’re here. Something to do with your demi-human friend, I presume?”

“So you noticed. Yes, Ceres suggested we speak with you, so we came to see if we could find you here,” I confirmed, pulling the letter Ceres had written out of my jacket pocket and handing it to Lynée. She accepted the note but placed it on the table without even opening or checking its contents.

“My Scarecrow fought you because he is a guide. I instructed him to put any party with cursed members through their paces to make sure they have some degree of strength. Otherwise, they could come find me, but I wouldn’t be able to do anything for them.”

“...Is the Scarecrow a monster in your service? Or...?”



“No. He’s a scarecrow—as his name implies—that moves, thanks to a skill of mine called Living Doll. That said, he’d equally match even the highest-ranked Seekers in this district. I call him Schwarz.”

“Schwarz...”

It sounded more like a name I would’ve heard back on Earth than here in the Labyrinth Country. As curious as I was to learn where it came from, I thought it impertinent to pry since I barely knew either of them.

“The average swordfighter in District Five is about a level eleven, but Schwarz’s skills are more on par with a level thirteen Seeker. You showed some real pluck, standing up to him.”

“...We didn’t have any other choice but to fight with all we had. Not that my attacks did any damage at all... He parried every strike with that Wild Sword Dance. Standing up to an enemy doesn’t mean anything if you can’t beat them,” Elitia countered, refusing to accept Lynée’s compliment at face value.

Lynée sighed, then shifted her gaze to the sword hanging from Elitia’s hip. “...I think I see now what got into that child’s mind. She’s the type to dote on people she takes a liking to. I did warn her not to get too attached to specific Seekers, but looks like she’s plum forgotten all about it.”

“Ceres signed on to work as our party’s designated artisan. That’s part of the reason why she left District Eight to join us here.”

“.....!” Lynée’s eyes flashed with surprise, though I honestly couldn’t immediately tell what I could’ve said to astonish her. “...I imagine she had her own reasons for moving to District Eight in the first place, but I must say I would not have expected the Guild to allow a professional Rune Maker to dedicate themselves to a single party, given how rare the occupation has become.”

“...Can I assume that has something to do with how we hardly ever see jades, even though they’re also theoretically citizens of this country?”

“Very intuitive, young Arihito. But if Ceres has not mentioned it herself, I daresay I shouldn’t speak for her. More importantly, let’s get back to why you all came to me. May I take a look at the curse on her?”

“...Theresia, do you mind?”

“.....”

Theresia shook her head. Lynée offered her a chair, then walked around behind her and parted the hair that fell over the nape of her neck. A portion of the Slave Seal had begun to change color, its black markings slowly turning bright red—a shining red, like a burning flame.

“So the Shining Simian Lord cursed her, did it? That blasted monster lives longer every time it regenerates... This iteration has outlived all the others before it, I imagine.”

“In other words...they get stronger every time they reincarnate?”

“Named Monsters can at times retain memories from their previous lives. Any Seekers who attempt to defeat them face far more difficult battles than they ever expected as the newest versions know exactly how to make up for their weak spots, sometimes manifesting that knowledge as new skills.”

“...When do you think the Simian Lord began using hexes?”

“I can’t say. Seekers don’t always provide the Guild all the details of how they defeat a monster...and rightly so. Seekers are in constant competition with each other, after all.”

I turned to Seraphina, who nodded as if to confirm what Lynée had said. It was a tricky question; we ourselves kept things close to our chest, especially the Armored Parts who joined us in battle. They were, in effect, a party trade secret. Our licenses did display some of those details, meaning they recorded at least hints of the truth. At the same time, if Murakumo and Alphecca were unique unto themselves, knowledge about them would mean next to nothing to other parties as long as the two stayed with us. Plus, based on my conversations with Louisa and Kozelka, it didn’t seem as if the Guild was privy to our every last movement.

“...At this point in the curse’s progression, I’d say she has five or six more days left before it takes over. If that happens, she will be forced into the Simian Lord’s servitude.”

“Lynée, our goal is to defeat the Simian Lord, but we understand we have to

first lift the hex or it will remain forever...according to what Ceres told us.”

“...When did that little one gain all this insight into curses...?” Lynée muttered.

Come to think of it, I knew Ceres was a consummate professional, but why did she have such deep knowledge about something that seemed completely unrelated to her occupation? It had never even occurred to me to question it.

“...It’s just as you say, except for one small detail: You don’t need to ‘lift the hex’ first... You need to destroy the caster with a Curse Eater. That is the only path I can recommend to you, virtually the only option that exists.”

“What do you mean by ‘virtually’...?”

“There is one other method, but it would be better if you consider it nonexistent. However, I would be lying if I told you that outright,” she clarified, choosing her words so carefully, I felt certain I could trust her honesty. For all I knew, simply learning about that other method could take a great toll on our spirits.

“...Where can we get a Curse Eater?” Elitia asked.

Lynée tipped the corner of her tricorn hat down to hide her face. “You have very little hope of coming across one by chance in a labyrinth, much less given the limited time you have to do so.”

“It may be hopeless, but we need to get one. We can’t afford to rely on chance,” Elitia insisted. “...Please, tell us. What do we need to do?”

“Aside from finding a Curse Eater in one of those treasure chests monsters drop, the only other way to get one is to prepare a weapon that can serve as the basis, one that can be used as a Sorcery Tool. It needs to have the capacity to withstand a curse engraved on it. If you can just get one of those, all that’s left is to find a Holy Stone. I can handle the processing for you.”

So first, we need to get our hands on a Sorcery Tool to convert into a Curse Eater. Do shops even sell those? Can we get one in a labyrinth?

“...Wait a second...”

“Something occur to you, Elitia?”

“Shirone changed jobs to be a Charm Master, right? If that shares anything in

common with a Witch Doctor's profession, then maybe—”

“...Those two swords we found! Atobe, let's check and see!” Igarashi cried enthusiastically, pulling the blind aside in her excitement.

I averted my gaze so quickly, I'm pretty sure I broke the speed of sound for a second.

“K-Kyouka, your clothes...!” Misaki alerted her.

“Huh...? Eeeep!”

“Ha-ha-ha, you totally popped out like ‘Say what now?!’”

“But I believe Ms. Kyouka makes an excellent point. Mr. Arihito, let's present the weapons to Ms. Lynée so she can determine if they would be satisfactory.”

“Ceres and Steiner said they'd remove all the sticky goo for us, so I'll bet they'd put it in our storage once they finished. Let me use my key and check,” Madoka offered, then pulled out her key. Luckily, we could still access the storage within labyrinths, so we didn't have to go back to town to check every little thing. “...They're here! So nice and shiny, too. Ceres and Steiner must have cleaned them already. I'm taking them out.”

Bloodsucker and Heaven's Stiletto—we could only hope one of them was a Black Magic Tool. Fervently praying, we all gathered around Madoka's license to read what it said.

◆★Bloodsucker +3◆

- > Recovers vitality every time it comes into contact with enemy blood.
- > The darker the area, the more it augments attack power.
- > Continuously activates Night Vision.
- > Increases endurance.
- > Increases agility.
- > Modified with Satisfaction Stone.

◆Heaven's Stiletto +4◆

- > Stabbings carry greater chance of landing a critical hit.
- > Augments attack power when user equips different weapons in either hand.
- > Increased attack speed.
- > Modified with Silent Stone.
- > Can be engraved with a curse.

"...This Heaven's Stiletto is a Sorcery Tool... We can use it to make the Curse Eater...!" I exclaimed after having instinctively done a double take when I read the very last line.

Overjoyed, we all looked at each other with elation, and Igarashi happily took Theresia's hand in hers—with this, we'd taken a big, undeniable step forward. There was still much left to do, though: We needed to find the other component of this recipe, the Holy Stone.

Lynée seemed to have read my mind. "Holy Stones have been unearthed in the Tremulous Foothills labyrinth," she said. "Though I've never spotted any myself, they say you can find them on the first floor. I'd like you to scour every inch of it."

"We will. I can't thank you enough, Lynée."

We now knew exactly where to go next. But first, we would have to earn a few more contribution points in this labyrinth before we left. If we got lucky, we wouldn't have to fight any more taxing phantoms, and better yet, rack up at least three thousand contribution points in this one expedition.

CHAPTER 4

Sun and Water Make for Beautiful Blossoms

Part I: Twilight Lakeside Stroll, Second Floor

After trekking back through the ring of fog surrounding Lynée's cottage, we stepped out once more onto the lake's eastern shore. The Scarecrow Schwarz left the cover of the mist, too, but got no closer to the water. He seemed to be keeping guard; given the fact he could apparently do so all on his own, I assumed he probably had some intrinsic quality that kept monsters from setting their sights on him.

"Arihito, should we try to earn more contribution points on this floor?" Elitia asked. "Or...?"

"Well, we do still have to check off the 'make it to the third floor in two District Five labyrinths' box, so we could try to go for it here or maybe another labyrinth... Hmm?"

"....."

Tugging on my sleeve, Theresia pointed across the lake to the opposite shore—and drew our focus to the clashing of metal and raised voices. The clamor continued for a while, then abruptly stopped.

"That sounded like another party in battle...," Igarashi noted. "It all cut off so suddenly, though. Do you think they ran down to the next floor to get away?"

"A likely scenario," said Seraphina. "I do hope they did so by choice, but if something drove them to it, they may be in terrible danger..."

We were much too far away to decipher the situation by what we heard alone. But if Seraphina was right, the party that fled to the second floor needed help.

"Couldn't they just whip out a Return Scroll if the brown stuff hits the fan?" Misaki asked.

"Maybe something prevented them from using it...," Suzuna speculated with concern. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

“...You’re right,” I agreed. “The good thing is, now we know we can hold our own against monsters in this labyrinth, so if nothing else, I doubt we’d get in the way if we lent them a hand.”

“Woof!” Cion barked as if to add her two cents. It couldn’t be easy for a guard dog to stand idly by when a party seemed to be in trouble.

“All right, let’s go for it and try not to run into any other monsters on our way. Who knows how long another battle might hold us up.” Hide and Active Stealth had proven effective at deflecting Madoka and Theresia from monster detection, but I’d have to use my Morale Discharge for the effects to apply to our entire party. “Madoka, is there anything on the market, any tools that make it easier to hide from monsters? It’s fine if you’re not totally sure.”

“Oh... Yes, I’ve been using the budget you left with me to buy items that seem like a good bargain. One of those is called Ninja Stealth Potion.”

“Wha—?! Th-they sell that...?!”

“I’m starting to get the feeling Maddie has the solution to all our problems hiding somewhere in her bag...,” said Misaki.

“O-oh, no, I wish. I just try to pick up items I don’t often see on the market, ones that would keep their value if we ever needed to sell them,” she explained matter-of-factly as if it were nothing, but I just had to marvel at the shrewd resourcefulness she’d already developed at such a young age.

“So that potion must be worth a small fortune, right?”

“Yes. It’s currently going for about fifty gold pieces, since Pharmacists can apparently only make so much of it.”

“I see... Then we probably won’t be able to get our hands on another for a while if we use it now, huh?”

But we don’t really have time to analyze this from every angle. I guess we’ll just use it and hope it keeps the monsters away.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Schwarz, standing on his single scarecrow pole, began to move. After a few steps, he looked back at us, then continued on as if leading the way.

“Think he’s showing us a safe route...?” wondered Igarashi.

“I can’t be sure, but let’s follow him. I think we can trust him.”

Skirting the forest that held Lynée’s cottage, we walked all the way around to the other side of the lake. A monster or two just barely stepped within range of Theresia’s detection, but we managed to pass them by without engaging. We followed Schwarz until he led us to a cave carved out of a massive tree, an opening I assumed went to the second floor. This place had unquestionably seen battle; arrows stuck out from tree trunks, and blood stained the nearby ground.

“Thanks for showing us the way. Please give our thanks to Lynée, too,” I told the Scarecrow.

Without a word, Schwarz turned back and nodded behind his skull mask, which, after the short time we’d spent together, no longer felt quite as menacing.

“.....”

Theresia found something—pieces of equipment dropped among the tall grasses. One, a small shield, had been pierced with arrows; the other looked like a harpoon used to fish. I couldn’t see anything wrong with them, but they must have been discarded for a reason.

“Madoka, do you have any Appraisal Scrolls?”

“Yes, a Mid-Grade one. I think it will give us more detail than my Appraise 1 could.”

“All right, let’s put it to work. Be careful not to touch anything,” I cautioned.

We never knew what unseen dangers might lurk within these pieces of equipment. *Better safe than sorry*, I thought, but my worries proved unfounded.

◆Nelzex Harpoon +3◆

- > Increases hit rate.

- > Especially effective against aqueous monsters. Doubles attack

damage to corresponding monsters and reduces damage from their attacks.

> Modified with Drought Stone.

“...Something must have made its owner drop this. Given that the stone embedded in the harpoon seems specifically chosen for this labyrinth, I doubt the owner voluntarily chose to part with it.”

“I think you’re on to something, Seraphina. We should return it if we can,” Elitia suggested.

“I can hold on to it, in that case. We’re better off taking it with us so we can return it the first chance we get,” offered Igarashi, then hung the harpoon from her back, spinning it deftly as she did. I could only guess her practiced hand came by way of the spear she always used.

“Ah... A-Arihito, it looks like the arrows stuck in the shield have poison on them,” Madoka informed me.

A District Five poison-wielding monster... The thought alone gave me chills, especially since that combination could possibly lead to a fatal situation, depending on which of my party members was the unlucky target. In this case, the shield penetrated by a blood-tipped arrowhead seemed to suggest its owner had taken the hit.

“I think I’ll take your advice after all, Atobe, and acquire Bulletproof 1 so I can dodge any sudden bolts that come my way,” Igarashi declared.

“Arf!”

“The monsters here are really dangerous, Cion, so I don’t want you using any skills to cover for us unless it’s absolutely necessary,” she continued. “Got it?”

“...Hnnn.”

Cion’s Covering skill had saved us countless times before, but Igarashi had a point. Theresia also had Antibody among her available skills, but she didn’t have any points left to take it. Even if she did, the skill only activated a certain percentage of the time, making it a less-than-ideal defensive strategy. Fortunately Igarashi also had Mirage Step, so she would probably manage to

evade an attack even at the very last minute.

“.....”

“...What’s wrong, Theresia?”

I thought I saw her trembling as she gazed at the broken shield, but she simply shook her head as if to say, *Nothing*.

“I think it’s best you hang back a bit,” Igarashi told her. “Cion and I can move up in your place.”

“How can we ever thank you, Kyouka? You’re always protecting our butts...”

“Don’t even worry about it. I’m good at that sort of thing; it’s probably why I got to be a Valkyrie... Don’t laugh, Misaki. You’re ruining a beautiful moment.”

“No, no, no, I was just laughing out of embarrassment for writing ‘Gambler’ on my form. A little late in the game, right? But...”

“I could say the same thing myself...,” I added. “But maybe let’s leave the chatting for later.”

“Then, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll take the lead,” Seraphina said.

With our brave Guild Savior at the helm, we all made our way to the second floor. Luckily the cave was big enough for Cion to squeeze through, too. The same humid air from the floor above hit us as we stepped out on the other side. A smattering of items littered the sandy bank of a pond not too far away from us. One of the dropped belongings—a backpack—was currently being torn apart by an enormous two-legged, blue-skinned reptile.

“.....!”

Theresia froze. In that moment, I finally understood why she had seemed so afraid.

◆Monster Encountered◆

★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

Level 12

Starving

Impervious to water attribute

Double-clap thunder strikes

Dropped Loot: ???

It's a starred monster... No wonder the other party had to run...!

Despite the snakelike aspects of its name, the monster appeared closer to what I imaged a lizardman would look like. Its massive frame was as tall as two grown men, and its head resembled a crocodile's; the creature held a double-edged sword in its right hand, and I could also see slits resembling gills on either side of its neck.

"Crunch, munch... Gulp..."

After ripping through the backpack and swallowing the contents whole, the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper focused not on us, but in another direction.

"GOAAAH!"

Something slammed into the reptilian monster's head, causing it to flail backward. Even with my Hawk Eyes, I barely managed to make out what had hit it: a small bullet-type pellet.

"Mr. Arihito, I believe the party that just fled shot the monster...!"

Glancing at my license, I confirmed another party was indeed trying to set up another attack on the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper—however.

◆Current Status◆

> NATALIA activated ONE-SHOT KILL → Next strike is guaranteed to hit

Doubled damage

Added instant death status

> NATALIA activated BREAK SHOT

> UNKNOWN ENEMY activated SHUTTERED EYE → Nullified BREAK SHOT

There's something else hiding out there... How did it nullify that bullet, though...?

Though the first blow had bent the Water Serpent backward, it hadn't gone in deep—in fact, the reptilian creature had enough time and confidence to lift the corners of its huge mouth in a nasty snarl, then run its tongue over its chops.

“Natalia, I'm going to buy us some time!”

“...Wait, Leonard! Don't get close! It's too risky...!”

◆Current Status◆

> LEONARD activated BEAST STEP

The boy called Leonard faced off against the Water Serpent twice his size. He wore almost nothing to protect himself aside from light armor covering a few vital spots on his body; maybe he was some type of martial artist?

He was too far away for even our fastest fighter, Elitia—much less me—to reach him in time, but I couldn't stand there and do nothing.

“Go around to the right!” I called out, instructing him to get on the Water Serpent's right side—in front of me.

“...Hyaaaah!”

Following my order, Leonard ran over to the beast's right flank and attacked; in that same instant, I loaded my magic gun with a darkness bullet and pulled the trigger.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated OUTSIDE ASSIST

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: DARKNESS BULLET

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated BUBBLE SKIN → Applied BUBBLE BARRIER to itself

> LEONARD activated CRESCENT KICK → BUBBLE BARRIER nullified attack

> Support Attack: DARKNESS BULLET's lightning attribute penetrated BUBBLE BARRIER

What was that...? A leg-based martial art?

Somersaulting to close the distance between himself and the Water Serpent, Leonard spun around on his hands and kicked the monster, his legs drawing a beautiful crescent moon through the air.

“GUGAAAAH...!!”

The reptilian beast wrapped itself in protective foam, only for the dark electricity from my bullet to race through every inch of its body covered by the watery barrier. Though the Water Snake nullified the damage from Leonard’s kick, at least my bullet seemed to pierce the frothy shield.

Leonard somersaulted backward after landing his kicks to put some space between himself and the monster. Recoiling in pain from the electrocution, the Water Serpent’s counterattack lost steam, giving the nimble Seeker plenty of time to regain his fighting stance.

“Wh-who are you...?!”

“Pardon the intrusion, but we’re here to assist!” Seraphina yelled back. “... Haaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Hit ★CURSED WATER SERPENT
WORSHIPPER

13 support damage

“GAH...!”

“Krh...!”

Seraphina rammed her shield into the Water Serpent but failed to produce any knockback or cause it to flinch. Immediately, the monster opened its enormous mouth to return fire; it moved so quickly, I didn’t have time to choose what support type might be best.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: SERAPHINA

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated RAGING RAPIDS

> SERAPHINA activated AURA SHIELD and DEFENSE FORCE

> RAGING RAPIDS hit SERAPHINA, LEONARD, and NATALIA

Reduced equipment durability

Severe knockback

The monster spewed torrents of rushing water from its gaping jaws as it turned its crocodile-esque head side to side. The devastating rapids engulfed not only Seraphina, who stood right beside the creature, but also Leonard and Natalia, who'd retreated some distance away.

"Kah...!" Seraphina sputtered through gritted teeth.

"Awooooo!"

Unable to nullify the knockback as she hadn't activated Immovable Mass, the blow sent Seraphina flying—but Cion caught her just in time.

Part II: The Scarlet Emperor

“Seraphina, fall back!” Elitia cried, then rushed in at the Water Serpent before it had a chance to double down.

I tried to back her up as she wasted no time unleashing her most powerful attack, but the darkness bullets in my gun lost their luster and the trigger failed.

If I can't hit its weak spot head on, I'll have to go with a Stun. Will my slingshot find its mark...?!

“Elitia, I'll support you!”

“Blossom Blade!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE

Elitia flashed her scarlet blade in a flurry of strikes. But that very same moment, the Water Serpent responded with such incredible speed, Elitia's attack looked almost as if it moved in slow motion.

“SHAAAAA!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated BUBBLE SKIN →
Applied BUBBLE BARRIER to itself

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated SWORDSNAKE STANCE
→ Blocks all sword-based attacks

“Rgh...?!”

Coated in a film of foam, the Water Serpent's blade ran down the length of Elitia's sword.

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER blocked BLOSSOM BLADE

13 support damage

“GA...AAAAH!”

The monster deflected Elitia’s attacks, but Attack Support 1 pierced its defenses; still, a single stage didn’t even manage to make the lizard reel. Her Blossom Blade rebuffed, Elitia couldn’t immediately switch to another tactic even though she had less than a second before the Water Serpent went in for the counter. But then—

“Yaaaaah!”

“Igarashi...!”

—our Valkyrie had already rushed up close to the crocodile-headed monster, firmly gripping the harpoon she’d just picked up.

Right... That party might’ve chosen that harpoon specifically to fight this monster. Let’s hope it does some damage...!

“Arihito...!”

“Not yet, Suzuna...!”

Though Misaki stood too far away from the monster for her cards to reach, the distance meant nothing to Suzuna’s arrows—but I couldn’t have her shoot just yet.

That thing is going to wait for Igarashi to strike...to make its move on her—no doubt about it...!

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT:
STUN

> KYOUKA activated THIRSTY THRUST → Hit ★CURSED WATER SERPENT
WORSHIPPER

Weak spot attack

Canceled BUBBLE BARRIER

★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER was Stunned

“GAAAAH!!”

Powered by the Drought Stone’s special effects, the harpoon in Igarashi’s hands blew all the protective foam surrounding the monster’s body away. And yet she didn’t stop there.

“Surge forth... Lightning Rage!”

◆Current Status◆

> KYOUKA activated LIGHTNING RAGE → Hit ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

Weak spot attack

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER was Electrocuted

“GOAAAA...!”

Electricity pulsed through the Water Serpent as it writhed in pain. The jolt also hit the pond, forcing Igarashi to take a huge jump back.

“—?!”

The very next instant, Igarashi’s eyes flickered away from the reptilian monster in a completely different direction.

This is it!

Faster than I could process the scene in my mind, faster even than I could yell out the orders, I instructed Suzuna to release her arrows—with a skill.

Command Support!

◆Current Status◆

> KYOUKA activated BULLETPROOF 1 → UNKNOWN ENEMY detected POISON ARROW

> ARIHITO activated COMMAND SUPPORT 1 → Now possible to guide party members’ targets

> SUZUNA activated AUTO-HIT → Next two shots will automatically hit

> SUZUNA activated FORBIDDEN ARROW

“Suzuna!”

“Hit your mark...!” Suzuna cried, unleashing her arrow toward a mangrove-like tree not at all near the Water Serpent.

The bolt seemed destined to lodge itself in a tree, but it flew past the obstacles in its way and hit the monster lurking in the shadows.

“—?!”

◆Current Status◆

> UNKNOWN ENEMY activated SHUTTERED EYE → Ineffective against AUTO-HIT

> FORBIDDEN ARROW hit UNKNOWN ENEMY

> UNKNOWN ENEMY revealed to be LAMIA OF THE DEEP

> LAMIA OF THE DEEP was Stunned

Action canceled

With an unholy wail, the hidden foe flailed backward and finally came into view, revealing an appearance true to the Lamia name: a monster with the upper body of a woman and the lower body of a snake—specifically, a water snake. Fortified by the Merciful Winged Mirage Morpho’s feeler, Suzuna’s bow now had the power to send out bolts that dipped and dodged past obstacles to find their mark. What’s more, those arrows seemed impervious to the monster’s Shuttered Eye skill, which evidently served to block incoming projectiles. It was the best attack we could’ve dreamed of.

Those arrows seem to do more damage than her usual ones. If we can keep feinting from this distance, we’ll destroy those monsters in no time.

“.....!”

“It’s okay, Theresia. Don’t push yourself. Leave this to us.”

“.....”

By no means could I have Theresia join this battle. If my hunch was right, that Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper bore a great resemblance to the monster that turned her into a demi-human. As long as we were able to work out an effective formation here, we could let Theresia rest and still cinch that victory.

“...I...I can still fight...!”

Though her Blossom Blade had been parried, Elitia squared off against the Water Serpent once more. The monster covered in aqua scales, no longer suffering under the throes of electrocution, looked derisively down at our blond swordswoman.

“Elitia!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: ELITIA

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated STRIKING FALLS → Hit
ELITIA

“.....!”

“No, Ellie! Don’t try to fight it on your own...!” Igarashi shrieked, her voice echoing off the water as Elitia parried the crocodilian monster’s downward slash—but that did nothing to stop the aqueous blades that rushed at her in the same strike.

The bows tying Elitia’s hair back snapped; blood streamed down her face. Even so, Elitia stood her ground.

“...I’ve always...been so afraid...of losing myself. But now...”

“Ms. Elitia, you mustn’t! If you continue like this—”

“I’ll...be fine...,” she insisted. The drive and determination filling her voice overpowered all our concerns.

She’d defeated more than a thousand monsters to save her friend, only to have the skills she’d relied on completely rebuffed—and she could not let that stand. Elitia would never allow herself to lose a swordfight to anyone before we defeated the Simian Lord. The power rippling through her shoulders as she rose

to her full height said it all.

“...I can get stronger. And it’s all thanks to everyone here...!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated BERSERK and RED EYE

“Ah... AAAAAH...!”

I couldn’t help the fear that overtook me the first time I saw her transformation. Time and time again, she’d challenged gigantic monsters that easily crushed Seekers and slain them with her blade—the Death Sword. The Cursed Blade. Manipulated by the blighted sword, she’d come this close to losing her sense of self countless times; even so, she kept on fighting. And despite all that, she had never hurt her friends. In fact, she only ever used the cursed weapon to protect us. Not for a second had I ever believed she was a truly crazed warrior.

“...Ellie... You have to win...,” Suzuna said. But she didn’t try to stop her friend—we all knew too well she’d made up her mind.

“All birds one day alight from their nests, chrysalises sprout wings, and swords—be they drenched in blood—gleam shining light,” I heard Ariadne say. She was trying to tell me something was about to change.

“I’ve always...always been afraid of the Scarlet Emperor. Terrified I might drown in its overwhelming power...but not anymore.”

Gradually, the sinister menace imbued in the cursed sword’s crimson energy that enveloped Elitia’s body faded away—in the end, all that remained was the purest scarlet hue shining as brightly as a red star.

◆Current Status◆

> Conditions to unlock colored weapon met

> First-level seal on the SCARLET EMPEROR lifted → SCARLET EMPEROR transformed

Assumed new name: ANTARES

> BERSERK skill converted to ULTIMATUM

> RED EYE skill converted to ASTERISK

“Elitia...!”

Her sword began to take a new shape, its blade a brilliant scarlet—one that no longer held any ominous resemblance to blood.

“This young woman had come within one step of her evolution. Then, fearing not to shed her own blood, she paved this path with her sword...”

“Murakumo... Think I can back her up?”

“But of course. You, Master, know well what you must do.”

I’d fought side by side with Elitia all this way, inspired and pushed forward by her strength. She’d now reached a new level of power, but I knew I could nonetheless find a way to help. Reaching over my shoulder, I wrapped my fingers around Murakumo’s handle. The Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper raised its sword to pummel Elitia once more—but I could already see what would happen next.

Part III: A Rainbow After the Rain

Something in Elitia had obviously changed, and we weren't the only ones to notice; the Water Serpent seemed to have caught on, too.

"SHOHHH...!!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated CLOUD BURST →
Area Effect: Heavy Rain

Added water attribute follow-up attack

With a loud whoosh as if expelling a great gust of air, the blue-scaled lizard raised its sword straight overhead, then froze. In the blink of an eye, storm clouds gathered over it and burst, unleashing a powerful deluge of rainfall.

"Rgh... Ugh... Wh-what is this rain...?!"

It weighed heavily as it poured down on us, sticking to our bodies and slowing our movements.

"Grrr...rrr..."

"A-Arihito... This rain...it's like craaazy heavy...!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER's stats increased

Added BUBBLE BARRIER

The crocodilian monster's skill created an area effect that augmented its powers and restored the Bubble Barrier that Igarashi had dispersed. Drenched in rain of its own making, the Water Serpent had clearly grown stronger. I wanted badly to support Elitia, but this heavy squall would surely throw all my bullets off.

I've got to stop this rain... I'll use Rear Stance to get behind the monster...!

"Master, you have no need to rush," Murakumo advised, and I abandoned the hasty idea. "Rain is a blessing for blooming flowers. Let us watch over our young friend... We can assist her best at the end of it all."

"RAAAAAAH!"

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA acquired COMET RAID

> ELITIA activated ULTIMATUM → Attack power and speed increased

Added SCARLET TRAILS

This is no Berserk... The sword isn't manipulating Elitia anymore. She's in control...!

Elitia raised her blade to the ready. The very instant she lowered into her fighting stance, the Water Serpent's double-edged sword came crashing down on her.

"JUOOOO!!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated STRIKING FALLS

> ELITIA activated COMET RAID → Added SWORD BARRIER

The monster's enormous sword slammed into the rain-drenched sand with explosive force—but Elitia was no longer there.

"DRRRRAAA!!"

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated BACKSLASH → Now capable of immediately activating sword-based skills

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated HORIZONTAL WRITING

Our brave swordswoman leaped through the pummeling rain as if it were

nothing. With speed unimaginable for a monster so massive, the lizard quickly unleashed a counterattack that swept sideways, slicing through the deluge. However—

“...!”

—the strike did not find Elitia.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: ELITIA

> ELITIA evaded

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated additional water attribute attack → Nullified by SWORD BARRIER and DEFENSE SUPPORT 1

> SWORD BARRIER rebounded → Hit ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

Accumulated one SCARLET TRAIL

Elitia raced with ever-increasing speed over the sludgy sand that should have sucked her down. The bright scarlet light hugging her body formed a protective barrier that left streaks of brilliance in the air behind it like the dusty tail of a shooting star. But it was no mere lingering light; the moment the Water Serpent’s additional blades of water sliced through it, a streak of the crimson blaze shot back up and slashed the monster’s arm.

“GAAAAH!!”

◆Current Status◆

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated RAGING RAPIDS →
ELITIA evaded

Though the onslaught of sharp, watery daggers raining down left not a hairbreadth’s room for error, Elitia spun through the air, gaining speed with every change in direction, and perfectly evaded them all. She even managed to ensure none of the failed shots strayed toward any of us.

Then, finally, Elitia secured the perfect blind spot—directly above the Water

Serpent's head. She knew an opening would come as soon as it finished spewing its treacherous fountain—and she was not going to let that slide.

“Arihito, now...!”

What kind of support did she want? Attack Support 1? No—that's right. Moments like this call for...

“Elitia... I'll support you!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA acquired DUAL WIELD → Activated immediately

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: BLADE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

I unsheathed Murakumo. That same instant, as if she'd seen exactly what I was going to do, Elitia reached out and clenched her empty left hand.

“Behold, quintessential rearguard swordsmanship. Elitia, avail yourself of my power...!” The instant Murakumo called out to Elitia, a second blade materialized in the swordswoman's left hand.

“Arihito...!” cried Suzuna.

“.....!”

My feet hadn't moved, but I was also right by Elitia's side. The feeling beyond all comprehension now felt natural, comfortable.

“Scatter your brilliance in step with my sworded dance, O blade of flowers!”

◆Current Status◆

> ELITIA activated SCARLET DANCE → Skill evolved to STAR PARADE due to change in occupation

> ELITIA activated BLOSSOM BLADE → Conditions met

Skill evolved to LUMINOUS FLOW

That's when everything changed. The cursed blade revealed itself to be, in fact, not only a weapon meant to throw its user in harm's way, exchanging

great power for even greater mental anguish. The longer one toiled and endured that turmoil, the greater the rewards it provided. Its vibrant red hue transformed to a dazzling sheen which enveloped Elitia, making her sparkle like a star in the night sky.

“GUOHHHHHH!!”

The Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper roared. Until this point, it had bellowed to intimidate; now it seemed to howl in recognition of the veritable threat before it.

“Raaaaah!!”

◆Current Status◆

> STAR PARADE increased the number of ELITIA's attacks

> MURAKUMO's special effect dispersed ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER'S BUBBLE BARRIER

> 42 stages of LUMINOUS FLOW hit ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

Accumulated 40 SCARLET TRAILS

> ELITIA activated additional attacks

28 stages hit

> ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER activated BLOODY CONFUSION → Attack power drastically increased

Entered CRAZED WARRIOR state

The onslaught of slashes unleashed beneath Elitia's resplendent shine forced the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper to teeter back and forth as they carved bright red gashes into its skin. Since she'd begun her assault with the second Murakumo in her left hand, Elitia had also managed to disperse the Bubble Barrier and prevent the monster from deflecting her strikes.

“GAAAAAH...!!”

Just like any other monster pressed up against a wall, the crocodile-headed

lizard activated a skill to turn its dire situation around—however.

“Arihito, give me your original support!”

“You got it!”

I answered her call without a second thought, absolutely confident I knew exactly what she’d asked for.

“Elitia, I’ll support you!”

No sooner had I activated my support than Elitia—before my eyes—returned her sword to its scabbard.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> ELITIA unleashed accumulated SCARLET TRAILS

Activated 71 stage attack

923 support damage

> Defeated 1 ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

> Area Effect: Heavy Rain was lifted

“GWAHHH...AHHH...”

The monster wailed as every single gash carved in its flesh added a fresh, new slash on top.

The devastating number of Elitia’s strikes blew past any remaining defenses the lizard had, slicing it open from crocodile head to toe. Though it had withstood her Luminous Flow once, the Water Serpent finally began to hemorrhage blood like a geyser, then collapsed on the spot.

“Whaaa—?! Wh-what the heck was that...?! Ellie just *clink* put her sword away, and something crazy just *slice, slice, sliced* that thing up like sushi...!”

Misaki, her admiration tinged with nervous apprehension, summed up exactly what I’d seen—but we still had one more enemy left.

“.....”

“...Wait—you already got her, Theresia?!”

After I’d told her not to push herself too hard, Theresia had accepted she couldn’t help in the fight against the Water Serpent and came up with her own plan. Our ingenious friend now dragged the Lamia of the Deep over from the shadow of that distant mangrove and lay her on the sand. Checking my license, I saw she had used Sneak Attack to knock the monster unconscious.

“H-her hair looks like snakes... Is she some sort of Medusa?” Igarashi wondered.

“That can apparently be used as a material called Water Serpent Locks...,” Madoka informed us. “A-Arihito, what should we do with her...?”

“The monster’s Shattered Eye blocked even long-range attacks, and it would seem she has other useful skills as well,” Seraphina pointed out. “Based on what we’ve seen thus far with humanoid monsters, I would suggest she may very well be tamed.”

“Good point. Let’s tie her up and send her to the Monster Ranch.”

I picked up the bow and arrows the Lamia of the Deep had dropped, instantly realizing only monstrous strength could draw that bowstring. We’d have to significantly modify it for Suzuna to ever use, or alternatively have the Lamia equip it herself and join us in battle.

“Theresia, you did an amazing job. You all did...,” I told the group. “Since we’re all soaking wet, how about we head home for the day?”

“Arf!”

Cion shook the water off her body, making us all laugh. Elitia then rejoined the group, looking cheerful, if a little abashed.

“Ellie...!” Suzuna rushed over and wrapped her arms around her friend. Seeing the two embrace, my other party members also gathered around them.

“I’m sorry to have scared you so much...,” Elitia said.

“You finally mastered it, didn’t you...?” Suzuna marveled. “Or did you uncover how to draw out its true power?”

“Both, I think. For so long, this sword had a strong hold over me. I’ve also

been drawn to its power, though, so I feel as if I may have lost myself in fascination. But now it's like I can trust it...like I can finally use this sword as I would any other weapon. I can't remember the last time I felt this way."

"Now that I think of it... I know it's quite late to ask this question, but why did you choose Swordswoman as your job, Ellie?" Igarashi asked, after which Suzuna took a step back and held her eyes to keep the tears from flowing.

Gently, with great care as to the emotional toll this had all taken on Suzuna, Elitia wrapped her hand around the handle of the Scarlet Emperor—now Antares.

"Well, I practiced fencing in my last life and thought that experience might be helpful here... But I wasn't very strong so I couldn't do much for my party. My job did depend on speed, though, so they usually asked me to bait our enemies and draw their focus."

"Fencing... I had no idea," I told her.

"Wait, that's the one with the super-skin-tight full-body suit, right...?" Misaki asked. "You wore that, Ellie...?"

"Don't make fun. It's the official uniform," Igarashi chided.

"It's fine; it's all in the past anyway. I do sometimes miss that mask and uniform, though. But I don't have many fencing-related skills, so now I'm just a Swordfighter."

As Elitia spoke, I suddenly remembered a note that had popped up on my license but I hadn't had the time to read during the battle.

"Elitia, I think I saw that your profession changed during that fight..."

"Perhaps she regained her Swordfighter position," said Seraphina. "Otherwise...Ms. Elitia, would you please check the details?"

Elitia pulled up the screen on her license. Her eyes widened slightly as she read it. Then she bashfully turned it around so we could see.

◆Seeker Information◆

Name: Elitia Centrale

Occupation: Flawless Knight, level 11

SEEKER STANDING

District Five Provisional Ranking: 346

Overall Ranking: 5,601

“H-hold up, this says you’re a knight...!” Misaki gasped. “Wait, what does *Flawless* mean again?”

“I’ve heard it used in relation to jewelry... Do you have a better idea, Atobe?”

“I think it also means something like ‘pure and undamaged.’”

“Would that suggest...mastering control of your weapon allowed you to transform from a Cursed Blade into a special, advanced occupation? The incredible, lightning-fast speed with which you dealt your attacks seemed far beyond what I would expect from someone of your level,” Seraphina noted.

We couldn’t have asked for a better boost to our forces or morale before our battle with the Simian Lord. Plus, we still hadn’t seen all of Elitia’s skills; surely one of them would help lead to a breakthrough.

“If your overall ranking is 5,601, that must mean there aren’t too many people in the four higher districts, right?” Misaki deduced, putting to words the thought that had probably crossed all our minds when we saw Elitia’s license. All the rankings in the districts we’d passed through so far had been in the tens of thousands, but those numbers suddenly leaped up once we made our temporary move to District Five.

“Yes, exactly. Though every individual resident is a powerful Seeker as a matter of course. Some elect to stay even after retirement to assist with defending the districts. They say the stronger the monster, the less frequently they cause stampedes...but if they do, they could create unmitigated havoc we call a Catastrophe,” Serapina elaborated for us.

“Eeep!” Misaki squeaked. “B-but I guess that makes sense. Even District Five looked like a full-on war zone in that stampede...”

Simply maintaining a spot in upper districts represented an incredible achievement. We had to focus and make real gains in strength, too. That was

what it truly meant to move forward.

“.....”

Theresia tugged on my sleeve. Only then did I notice the two Seekers who'd been fighting the crocodile monster walking toward us: the young boy who'd specialized in kick attacks and a woman holding a firearm that looked like a rifle.

Young boy... Wait, maybe a young girl? Leonard sounds more like a man's name, but...

Upon closer inspection, this Leonard person looked pretty androgynous—or, rather, more like a young girl in boy's clothing.

“Thank you very much for saving us. My name is Leonard.”

“And I'm Natalia. We were in real trouble until you came around. Our party had been hunting for the normal version of those Water Serpents, but then all of a sudden we fell into the Named Monster's sights... It sprang out of the water in a sneak attack and we all ran for it, but the two of us didn't make it into our party's Return Scroll range and got left behind.”

“That sounds terrible... I'm glad you're both all right,” I replied.

“Would you like to use one of our healing potions?” Madoka offered.

“No, thank you. We've sustained some injury, but nothing too serious,” Natalia politely declined. “...However, I would greatly appreciate it if you would let us purchase a Return Scroll from you.”

I asked Madoka to retrieve one from our storage. Apparently, only so many Return Scrolls could be sold at a time, sometimes not enough to go around if a few parties stocked up on extras to save for themselves.

“Thank you, you really saved us out there. Our party is called Eisenritter,” Leonard informed us. “I hope we meet again in town so we can properly thank you...”

“Don't worry about it, we should all help each other out in a pinch,” I told him. “If we do run into each other again, I hope you'll tell me a bit about your seeking adventures.”

Leonard and Natalia looked at each other, then at me. In a surprising turn,

Natalia shot me a wink; I never would've pegged her as the type to do so.

"Wh-wh-wha—?!"

"Fellas like you remind me the Labyrinth Country's not all bad. You too, ladies—thank you so much. We couldn't have gotten out of that without your help. Until we meet again," Natalia said, then practically fled via the Return Scroll—with Leonard in tow, of course.

"...Wh-what in the world was that? Atobe, care to explain?"

"U-umm...I think perhaps she was on a bit of an adrenaline rush after getting through that scrape..."

"That rifle of hers... Firearms are precious rare equipment in this country, yet she appeared to have mastered its use. Evidently, your leadership skills can leave even such experienced Seekers in amazement, Mr. Arihito. I feel exceedingly proud to be your subordinate."

"W-wait... I don't think of any of you as my subordinates. We're all equal party members," I insisted.

"Manager Arihito, looks like we crushed our mission! Requesting permission to take a quick look-see on the third floor!"

"M-Misaki, you couldn't think of anything higher than manager?" Igarashi asked.

"Arf!"

Cion chimed in with perfect timing, though it was anyone's guess as to whether she understood the gist of the conversation.

The rain let up, revealing a beautiful rainbow in its wake. We took a short break to admire the radiant scene, laughing and congratulating each other on a job well done.

Part IV: Family

Using the key Melissa had lent me, I transported the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper to our Repository; we couldn't very well carry it ourselves. The Lamia of the Deep, on the other hand, had become Submissive after we bound her with the winding tendrils of a vine bullet.

"....."

"....."

Once she'd awoken, the snake-haired monster locked eyes with Theresa; they seemed to be somehow communicating. After a few moments, though, the monster closed her eyes.

"Should we take that as a sign she will no longer resist...? Cion, could you carry her for us?" Seraphina asked.

"Arf!"

Our trusty Silver Hound easily tossed the Lamia of the Deep on her back. It looked like we wouldn't have an issue taking her with us.

"Madoka, does District Five also have Carriers we can hire?" I inquired.

"Yes!" she chirped. "They run through the Merchants Guild here also, but the prices are higher since it's much riskier to work in this district's labyrinths."

"I see... Thanks. We wouldn't want to leave materials deep in a labyrinth after working so hard to defeat the monster."

"Couldn't we just transfer them to the Repository?" Igarashi asked.

"That's a good point," I said. "We should do a price comparison and see if it works out better for our budget to rent more Repository space."

Suzuna, Elitia, and Misaki came over as Madoka, Igarashi, and I discussed the issue; they apparently had something particular in mind.

"Arihitooo...," Suzuna cooed. "Ah...!"

“Huh?”

“Ah...n-no, sorry. It’s just, I got so used to hearing Misaki call you like that, it just slipped...”

“*Haaah*, you almost gave me a heart attack, Suzu! I thought you’d decided to cross over to the dark side with me for a sec. I’d be allll for it if you did, of course.”

“D-don’t...,” Suzuna protested. “That’s not what I—”

“Wh-what’s up? Something on your mind?” I cut in.

Elitia showed me her license; according to the display, it looked like the Water Serpent had dropped a Red Box, though we hadn’t found any.

“That was a pretty intense battle, though, so I think maybe it’s buried somewhere,” Elitia said. “This only came up on my license, probably because I was the closest one to it.”

“Right, I see...” I mulled over the prospect. “Why don’t we try looking for it with Fortune Roll and Moon Reading? I doubt we’ll have any other use for those two skills today.”

“Yes, that’s what I was hoping to suggest... Arihito, could you please give us a cheer?” Suzuna requested.

“Pretty pleeease!” Misaki added.

Figuring that meant Morale Support, I asked Suzuna and Misaki to turn around, then laid a hand on each of their backs and activated the skill.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated MORALE SUPPORT 1 → Party morale rose by 13 points

“...Th-thank you very much...”

“Man, I feel like I could take on *all* the worlds when my morale maxes out.”

“...A-Arihito, don’t you get drained after using your skills on us so much?” Elitia nervously asked.

At this point, I was so constantly focused on having everyone walk in front of me, you could've called it a vocational compulsion. But after checking my license, I saw Morale Support had barely made a dent in my magic supply.

"That takes barely any magic, so I'm fine to raise your morale as far as it can go. But I can't use it more than once at a time, meaning it'd take at least forty minutes to completely fill your morale if we started from zero."

"Th-that's... I'll keep that in mind, but that's really not what I meant..."

"W-well, if it does not greatly tax Mr. Arihito, then perhaps we need not concern ourselves. He is the heart of our party, after all," Seraphina added, uncharacteristically flustered.

I turned to Igarashi and Madoka for an explanation, but the former averted her gaze and Madoka just looked somehow mystified.

"Did you maybe start using a new technique, Arihito?" she asked. "It felt a little different from how you usually cheered us on when you were fighting those big ghosts...and my magic went back up, too."

"Yeah, I acquired a skill called Tactical Reload. Whenever I reload—add more bullets to keep shooting—it restores the magic I used in the previous shot and sends the same amount to all of you."

"Ah-hahhh... So that's what it was, huh? I tootally got the feeling my magic was, like, welling up inside me or, like, that I was getting an extra espresso shot of the stuff."

"I was not aware you possessed such a skill, Mr. Arihito... And yet the total magic you shared with us greatly exceeds the amount you restored unto yourself. How very like you to replenish our magic stores."

"Seriously, were you some kind of saint in your past life? I don't know how else anyone would get access to a skill like that..." Igarashi sighed. "A-and one more thing. Whenever possible, do let us know if you've picked up a new skill. We need to mentally prepare ourselves for it, you know."

"O-of course. I'll be sure to update you all if I get a skill that will affect you in any way. I'm sorry to shock you."

“I wouldn’t exactly say we’re shocked, but... Y-you know what, never mind. Just keep doing what you’re doing, Atobe. We’ll make it work, right, ladies?”

Memories of my days at the company came rushing back, vignettes of moments when colleagues asked, “Is it just me, or does Ms. Igarashi send you all the hardest work?” or, “How do you keep up with all that?” While I’d also thought she could be somewhat aggressive with her demands, I could sense that all the hard work would pay off in the end and told them, “Making what your boss asks for work is all part of the job.” For better or worse, after that, people sometimes called me a “Model Corporate Drone.”

“...S-speaking of which, Misaki called me Manager a minute ago, but you’ll always be the Manager in my eyes, Igarashi.”

“Don’t be silly... You don’t have to worry about that anymore. You’re in charge of operations now, aren’t you?”

“O-oh, no, I wouldn’t say that...”

“Aw, don’t be shy. You’re always charging my operations, for sure. Right, Suzu?”

“The way you put it sounds a little rude, Misaki... But I do always feel like I can rely on you to lead us in the right direction, Arihito.”

For some reason, explaining Tactical Reload had everyone turning toward me with admiration in their eyes. A little uncomfortable with all the attention, I cleared my throat to get us back on track.

“*Ahem...* Miskai, Suzuna, think you can give it a shot?”

“Sure caaan! Morale Discharge, Fortune Roll!”

“Morale Discharge, Moon Reading!”

◆Current Status◆

> MISAKI activated FORTUNE ROLL → Next action will automatically succeed

> SUZUNA activated MOON READING → Success

Suzuna’s eyes glazed over as she pointed in a certain direction; following her

lead, we saw a blue light shining over a section of the sandy lakeshore. Cion padded over and started digging. After a little while, she unearthed a red treasure chest.

“Woof!”

“Thanks, Cion. Now then... I’d like to just take a quick look around the third floor. Who’s up for it?”

“How about I go instead? If we’re just going to touch ground, I think I can probably make the trip the fastest,” Elitia offered.

“.....”

“You want to come with me, Theresa? All right, let’s be careful not to let any monsters find us.”

After calling on Suzuna’s Oracle again to get an idea of where to find the entrance leading down, Elitia and Theresa ran off in that direction, activating skills to speed up as they went.

“Earlier during battle, I believe I saw Ms. Elitia wielding two blades. Is that an intrinsic skill she possesses?” Seraphina asked.

“Yes, I think that comes from her Dual Wield skill, but the sword she held was a temporary blade I used one of my skills to make.”

“Is there nothing you cannot do...? Is this sort of support something you can share with other party members as well?”

“It’s possible, but you’d need to have one hand open for it to work. That skill I mentioned lets my party member use whatever weapon I have on me for a secondary attack, so I don’t know how often that specific kind of cooperation would come in handy.”

“Understood. I had wondered if perhaps you could provide me with a sword should my blunt force attacks fail to find purchase, but in light of what you said, it may be wiser to request you continue supporting me as you have thus far.”

“Sometimes that support lets us use Atobe’s weapons that carry attributes we don’t otherwise have to get our enemies in their weak spots,” Igarashi recalled.

“Hopefully I can find ways to effectively support you all, especially now that

we know ice attributes are the Simian Lord's weakness."

I've gotta make sure I never stop brainstorming ways for our party to do the most damage possible.

Then, just as a promising thought seemed to come to me, I saw my license mark Elitia and Theresia as being on the third floor. A short while later, it once again switched back to showing them on the second.

"Theresia and Elitia are on their way back. I think we've probably earned enough contribution points, so maybe it's time to say good-bye to this labyrinth for now."

"Understood," Seraphina agreed.

"If we go up to the first floor, though, we might find more of those phantom monsters...", Igarashi said nervously. "Let's be careful not to run into any others."



Once we'd reunited with Elitia and Theresia, we returned to the first floor and found Schwarz the Scarecrow waiting for us. Following the safe route he led us through, we saw no more monsters and safely exited the labyrinth.

"That was so nice of Lynée, sending him to guide us out," Igarashi noted appreciatively.

"I imagine getting to seal the Altargeist away meant a lot to her," I said.

Though we still knew hardly anything about Lynée, I was sure her assistance would prove invaluable.

"*Phew*, I'm staaarving. Raiding a labby is always such hungry work... Wait, it's so dark out here! I must've lost my sense of time since it's, like, aalways twilight in there, but I guess we were there for a while, huh?"

"Yeah, time for dinner. Let's drop off this Lamia of the Deep at the Monster Ranch and head to the Forest Diner," I suggested.

Our next steps decided, we started heading out. That's when Theresia stopped in her tracks.

“...Theresia?” I called out from behind.

She turned around—and gave me a terrifying shock. Though I never got to hear her speak for herself, checking in with her expressions always gave me a sense of relief. But this time, it brought an unspeakable thought to mind:

This person standing in the dark against the backdrop of the town’s streetlights looked like a total stranger.

“Theresia, what’re you gonna get? Ah, sorry, you talking to Arihito-poo?”

“.....!” Theresia gasped, startled by Misaki’s voice, then quickly turned away from me and ran to catch up with the others.

What I’d just seen could only mean one thing: The Etch-a-Hex was claiming more and more of Theresia. Bitterly, I realized I couldn’t afford to spend every last minute before our time here ended to prepare. We had to finish our Curse Eater and destroy that Simian Lord, and we didn’t have a second to waste.

I knew I should tell the others about the change I’d noticed in Theresia. What if it forced her to do something against her will while we all raided a labyrinth...? The safest thing would probably be to leave her behind, but I didn’t want to remove her from our party—and on and on went my contradictory ruminations.

Right now, she’s still okay. We haven’t had any problems...but...

“...Mr. Arihito, I hope you’re not unwell?”

Lost in my thoughts as I walked, I suddenly realized I knew the two people approaching us from the opposite direction.

“Ah...I-Ivril. Sorry, I just have a lot on my mind...but I don’t want to keep my friends waiting. I should go catch up with them,” I told the prim-and-proper young belle in the wide-brimmed hat.

Given the late hour, her umbrella hung unopened from her hand. Viola stood faithfully behind her mistress.

“Please do know we are taking every possible measure to prepare so we may assist you in battle at a moment’s notice. Once we successfully raid the Blazing Red Mansion, I would be so terribly delighted to share a meal with you.”

“Of course. We received permission to stay here for six days, counting today, but I believe I may ask for your help sooner rather than later.”

“Very well. I do want to inform you that both Viola and I are at level twelve. As such, while I may seek your opinion in regards to the battle plan, please do feel free to entrust us with any task, regardless of its difficulty. We shall not disappoint.”

“Thank you for letting me know. Our party average is relatively low, but I’m sure we can work together and do what we must as well.”

Ivril’s eyes flitted over to Elitia walking ahead, chatting with her friends. Her expression must have looked quite different from the haggard young woman Ivril had seen the night before.

“I no longer see the wayward shadow clouding her countenance... She must have long ago earned the qualifications to grow into her power and needed but a catalyst to begin the transformation.”

“I absolutely agree. We can all feel the real progress she’s made.”

“...What a remarkable breakthrough... Truly heartening...to behold,” Viola praised, her speech halting and plodding. The moment she began to speak, it almost felt as if time itself had slowed.

“I do apologize, Viola is a woman of very few words... Even I had not heard her voice for quite a while.”

“...I...beg...your pardon...”

“Please, don’t worry at all. It makes me happy to hear others recognize my party’s growth.”

“...As does...the opportunity...to fight alongside...you...bring me—”

“I share her feelings entirely. Well then, Mr. Arihito, have a pleasant evening,” Ivril cut in, not waiting for Viola to finish her sentence before leading her away. They seemed headed toward an area with plenty of restaurants, so I assumed they were going to get some dinner as well.



We first went to the Monster Ranch and got the Lamia settled, modifying my

Summoning Pendant so we could call on her, too. Next, we dropped by Ceres and Steiner's workshop, where Falma had just arrived. We invited the three of them along for dinner.

On our way to the Forest Diner, I caught sight of three people coming our way.

"...Atobe, is that...?"

"A cat woman... Is that Melissa's mom...?"

Just as Misaki had guessed, Melissa was walking somewhat shyly side by side with a woman a little taller than herself. The woman wore leather armor over the white fur covering her body, and she had a cat mask on her head marking her as a demi-human.

"Rikerton, Melissa... Looks like you were able to meet up after all," I said.

"...Yeah."

As expected, Melissa's demi-human mother said nothing. But once she'd learned we were her daughter's party, she bowed slightly in our direction.

"How very sly of you, Mr. Arihito... So you knew my wife was in this district," Rikerton said with a tinge of embarrassment as he walked over to me. From his expression, it seemed likely he had come up to District Five without knowing whether he'd be able to see her.

"I was hoping you three would take advantage of our time here and find a moment to reunite."

"...That's very kind. Melissa has brightened considerably after meeting you and your party...and she seems overjoyed to be with Ferris, my wife."

"Dad, you didn't have to tell Arihito that."

"Whoops, looks like I crossed a line... Ferris's party leader—someone I owe a lot to for treating me so well back in the day—has agreed to allow my wife to spend the day with us as a family."

"Really? That's wonderful."

Rikerton nodded, beaming from ear to ear. Suzuna brought her fingers to her

eyes to hold back tears at the heartwarming sight of Melissa and her parents, while Madoka pulled down her turban to hide her face—clearly, the scene had greatly moved them both.

“I’m so happy for you, Mr. Rikerton, that you all got to meet,” Falma said warmly.

“Ferris,” said Ceres, “Steiner and I work exclusively with Mr. Arihito’s party as well. We all look forward to your safe return.”

Ferris said nothing, but she gently lay a hand on Melissa’s shoulder. Just as with Theresa, her mask covered everything but her mouth; still, her expression felt peaceful and warm. The Rikerton family hadn’t yet eaten, either, so we added them to our ever-growing dinner party and headed for the Forest Diner.

“.....”

Theresa closely watched Melissa and her family and stood rooted to the spot. Only once I had caught up to her did she slink over to my side and follow me.

“Hm? ...What’s wrong?”

She took hold of my shirt, as gentle as always. She was still the same old Theresa—I’d never let that change.

◆THERESIA’S Status◆

► Evil Domination progression: 13

CHAPTER 5

The Devotees' Crucible

Part I: A Cheerful Dinner / New Job, New Skills

Once again, we were ushered to a private room in the Forest Diner, where Maria the Chef took care of our orders. Our huge party of sixteen sat at two giant tables with the Rikerton family, the Mistral Forge artisans, Falma, and Louisa at one. Cion also had a special guard dog meal prepared for her in one corner of the room.

This time, I asked Igarashi to raise a toast for us. Once everyone had a drink in hand, she stood up.

“We’re so lucky and happy to have Melissa’s mother and Falma join us today, in what I’m sure will be one of our liveliest dinners to date. While we have yet to accomplish our ultimate goal, here’s to resting while we can, celebrating when there is cause to rejoice, and preparing for the important task ahead of us... Cheers!”

“““Cheers!””””

I took a swig of my beer, a brand of ale offered at the Forest Diner called The Forest Minstrel. Chilled to perfection in a pint glass, its fruity flavors unfolded beautifully on my tongue, leaving very little bitterness in the aftertaste.

“They say the higher progress in districts, the more delicious the drinks,” Igarashi mentioned, “but I wonder if it’s a good thing...”

“Well, different things motivate different people... Though, of course, it’s not a good idea to get too hooked on alcohol.”

“Looks like we don’t need to worry about you there, Atobe... Seraphina, are you sure you wouldn’t like anything?”

“It’s best if I don’t drink for one of my skills, though if I had to choose, I suppose I would say I do enjoy alcoholic beverages...”

Does Stoic prevent her from letting loose at all? Maybe it’s rude to drink in front of her—or so I thought.

“Please, don’t hold back for my sake. I’ve always had what you might call an interest in self-restraint.”

“Oh... Th-thanks. It would be nice to share a drink with you at some point, though,” I told her.

“Yes, it would be my pleasure. However, I cannot yet be sure how much it might affect my performance, so for the foreseeable future, I believe it best I continue to abstain.”

Seraphina’s self-control impressed all my party members; some also seemed oddly unsettled, though I couldn’t imagine why.

“D’ya think I’d get some kinda special powers if I took a page out of Seraphina’s book? Like, could I turn into a Super Duper Extra Gambler?”

“You’re still too young to drink, Misaki... You and I can go out for one when we’re old enough.”

“A drink with Suzu! Omigosh, how *craaazy* sappy would it be to go for your first taste of that sweet, sweet juice with a sweet, sweet childhood friend?”

“Well... I actually think it might be nice to experience that together,” I opined.

“Huh? With you...? Ohhh, you mean for me and Suzu to exchange that sacred sake cup. Oh yeah, I’ve seen my fair share of yakuza movies, too, you know.”

“How about you dial it down a bit, Misaki. Madoka’s too young for this kind of talk...,” Elitia warned.

Surprisingly, Misaki did actually seem to simmer down, but I knew she’d already gotten too worked up; I felt a headache coming on. At the same time, I did appreciate the way her antics always made me momentarily forget the dire situation we found ourselves in.

“Lots of people in my family like to drink a ton, so they told me I could grow up to be a heavy drinker, too,” added Madoka.

“Oh, I didn’t know... I’m from a pretty cold area, too, so I think high alcohol tolerance is in my blood.”

I guess that meant Madoka came from a large family. Elitia’s eyes flashed with surprise. Then the two girls smiled warmly at each other.

“You say that, Ellie, but I bet you’re actually suuuch a lightweight. You’ll flop over like a fish and be all, like, ‘Just take me now!’”

“‘Take me now...’? Misaki, what exactly does that mean?”

“N-nothing important...,” I cut in. “Wow, looks like we’re starting off strong with some tasty appetizers, huh?”

Igarashi portioned out the hors d’oeuvres from the large dishes they came in, plating them so perfectly, there was nothing for me to do. Though not exactly the ribbed sweater she had on when we first arrived in the Labyrinth Country, the knit top Igarashi wore accentuated her chest every time she bent over. *Is this some kind of optical illusion?* I thought, but then forced myself to look away.

“I’m so glad you all made it back safely... Mr. Atobe, I’m wonderfully pleased to see your explorations are going smoothly,” Louisa said as she came over to sit by me, lightly clinking her glass against mine.

She’d dropped by the apartment first before coming out to dinner, changing out of her work uniform and into something that gave her an entirely different vibe. As always, her generous chest stood out and left me at a loss for where to look when she leaned over.

“Thank you, Louisa. But I think we may have to take a bit of a gamble tomorrow...”

“Black Boxes do always get the heart pumping, don’t they?” said Falma. “... Mr. Atobe, thank you so much for inviting me to dine with you all again this evening. It’s wonderful to see Cion looking her usual cheerful self, too. I could swear she’s grown again since the last time I saw her.”

“Yes, she’s always such a great help. She even rescued a couple of civilians during the stampede here.”

Though deeply engrossed in her meal, Cion seemed to hear us talking about her. She looked up and over at us, happily wagging her tail back and forth.

After Rikerton had finished his first drink, Melissa refilled his glass, her mother helping her hold the bottle. I could almost see the love sparkling in Rikerton’s eyes. Nothing could get me to interrupt this lovely family moment. When

Rikerton did look over my way, I just silently raised my glass in his direction in an attempt to convey even a fragment of how glad I was for him.

“Melissa and Rikerton look so happy... These are the moments you really need to treasure.”

“You’re like a pro at those subtle, super-considerate moves aren’t you, Arihito? These certified Precious Moments always tug at my heartstrings, then your thoughtfulness lands the final blow.”

“Hey, you’re making me out like the bad guy here, you know...,” I retorted, only to see that all of my friends’ eyes had reddened at the lovely family scene.

If you asked me, they were far kinder than I was. Elitia, apparently embarrassed to have anyone see her emotional, kept her gaze fixed as far away from the Rikerton family as possible. Misaki seemed ready to pounce with another naughty scheme as soon as she noticed, but Suzuna caught her in time and held her back. Watching the way those three perfectly balanced each other out gave me great peace of mind.

“And now, your seafood course,” Maria announced as she brought in the next dish, gas lungfish steamed in foil. Apparently, it was made with ingredients that helped replenish magic. It also increased lung capacity, which I imagined might protect against fatigue.

“Mr. Atobe, would you allow me to assist in serving you?”

“O-oh, Louisa, you must be exhausted after a long day’s work,” Igarashi cut in. “I’m happy to do that instead—”

“My dearest *elder* sisters, battling it out in a restaurant is a big no-no,” Misaki chided. “Here you go, Arihito-poo. You can have my broccoli or whatever this is that came with the fish.”

“I’ll eat that for you, Misaki...,” said Suzuna.

“...But I feel bad asking you to take it for me all the time... Y-you know what, it’s fine. I’ll just eat it.”

Thinking we could probably avoid this kind of issue in the future if I had a handle on what everyone liked or disliked, I decided I should ask them all about

it later. Not to engage in stereotypes, but Melissa and her mother seemed especially enthralled by the gas lungfish. Theresia, too, plowed through her plate with her usual gusto.

“.....”

“Hm? ...A-are you sure?”

While Louisa and Igarashi battled it out, busily keeping the other in check, Theresia carved out a portion of the fish, stuck her fork in it, and handed it to me.

“You really can’t beat Theresia. She knows exaaactly how to swoop in and get closest to you, Arihito.”

I was this close to asking Misaki to speak only when spoken to. Though Theresia looked somewhat embarrassed to have taken over the responsibility, she dutifully fed me the dish bite by bite. It did seem somewhat odd, though, given how she usually kept all her focus on her own food. But if asked whether it made me happy or not, I’d have to go with the former—no question.



After dinner, the whole group—Ferris and Falma included—returned to our lodgings. Rikerton hung back, apparently wanting to have a word with me.

“My, my... Well, you certainly caught me in a rather compromising light.”

“Not at all. Watching you three made me hope one day I could be so lucky.”

“Come now, you’ve got many, many years ahead of you before you retire and settle down... That said, I’m sure you’d make a great father. I can see it now.”

“N-no, that’s far too... You’ve got me in a corner here.”

Rikerton laughed heartily. He must’ve been watching his drinks, because all the redness from the alcohol had already faded away from his cheeks. “My wife and I were just discussing this earlier...and Ferris says she would like to help you and your party in this important battle.”

“...Is that what her party wants as well?”

“According to my daughter, who can communicate with her, it’s what Ferris

herself wishes,” he explained. “The details haven’t been worked out yet, but if she were to approach you with the possibility, would you consider it?”

“Of course, thank you. That’s really encouraging to hear. It gives me hope.”

We could never have too many hands on deck for our rematch with the Simian Lord. Part of me didn’t want to rope Melissa’s mother into this dangerous mess—the same exact internal conflict Elitia must have struggled with this entire time. I wondered what Rikerton thought about the idea. Would he object to putting his wife in harm’s way?

But Rikerton’s reaction quickly overshadowed any concerns I had.

“Ever since that day you first came to my shop, one thing after another in my life has kept changing. I racked my brains for what else I could do while I waited for my wife’s return...but couldn’t land on anything. That’s why, right now, my heart swells with happiness—happiness that I can be here, and that Ferris wants to do her part to help.”

“Rikerton...”

“You’re like a guiding star to me, shining down upon and illuminating hopes I’d always considered out of reach. I really admire you, Mr. Arihito.”

“I...I have every single person who’s helped me along the way to thank for where I am now. Of course, that includes you, Rikerton.”

Rikerton chose to say nothing; he simply nodded and extended his right hand to me. After a firm handshake, he left the restaurant.

“...A star, huh...?”

Suddenly, I remembered Polaris had also based their party name around a particular star.

Do we have anything that could represent us like that? Oh, right—Ariadne, the Iron Wheel.

Just as all the individual stars align to form constellations, my party and I gathered all the strength we could around us to progress forward as one giant wheel together. Forgetting what I did for the moment, my party members had stuck with me through the most difficult labyrinths I never would’ve gotten

through on my own, overcoming every obstacle they threw our way. All my hopes rested on their shining stars.

...If we all looked back over what we've been through...what would they feel about me?

The diner staff began clearing the tables, which I took as my sign to leave. But just as I headed for the door, Maria came walking in.

"Thank you so much for the meal, Maria. Everything was delicious, and my whole party loved it."

"How very kind of you. I'm so pleased to hear it."

Maria humbly bowed in thanks; I returned the gesture and couldn't help but remember my days as an office worker exchanging business cards with colleagues.

"Your party informed me you defeated a Named Monster."

"Yes, one called the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper."

"...While I imagine some may feel resistance to making a meal of the monster you only just slew, would you consider sharing with me any parts of the monster you don't expect to need for materials? I would like to cook something with them."

"Huh...? S-sure, I don't mind."

I don't know if I could eat that snake that gave us such a fight for our lives, I thought for the briefest moment before recalling most of our monster-based food.

"Would you like to come see what you might be able to use after we dissect it?"

"That would be wonderful, thank you. Is there anything else you wish I might prepare for you?" Maria asked, whipping out a notebook and pen. Speaking of wishes, there was one thing I'd discussed with Ceres before.

"We came upon several fruits that can boost some stats a little while back. Could I ask you to make something from those for me?"

“Yes, of course. Such fruits are incredibly valuable. You chose to preserve them?”

“I thought it would make the most sense to save them for times of need, but I also heard cooking them can augment their properties... Not to mention, you kindly served us such valuable fruit as well.”

“I felt it only appropriate to thank the Most Distinguished Seekers who helped quell the stampede with a fittingly distinguished meal. Unfortunately, it’s impossible to grow such capability-boosting produce, so we only very rarely manage to purchase any... But if you could provide the ingredients, I would be more than happy to see what recipes I can craft around them.”

“That sounds like quite a lot of extra work to start from building the recipe...”

“We Chefs have a skill called Recipe Creation that allows us to sense how best to prepare unfamiliar ingredients.”

“I see... Well, I would definitely appreciate it. When should I bring them to you?”

“I can step in to retrieve them in the morning when I deliver your breakfast. I look forward to serving you again here at the—excuse me. I mean, I shall see you in the morning.”

After arranging the order for the morning, I left the Forest Diner. The thought of eating that crocodile had never even crossed my mind—but if Maria suggested it, I expected we might see some interesting benefits.



As I awaited my turn at the baths after returning to our lodgings, Elitia came over to see me.

“Arihito, you sure you didn’t miss sharing the bath with Theresia tonight?”

“W-well... That’s... How can I put this...?”

“Heh-heh... I know. Theresia always tags along after you. She did join us earlier but seemed to get very light-headed after soaking for only a few minutes, so a few of us rushed to leave with her...”

“...Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s resting in our room now. She seemed to calm down after a drink of water. I assume she’ll come back out here at some point, though, so make sure to check in to see how she’s feeling.”

Since equipment resistances didn’t do any good in the bath, Theresia was always left less tolerant to hot water. I trusted from what Elitia told me that she was probably fine, but I’d almost jumped to my feet at first with worry. And yet Elitia didn’t seem at all annoyed at the nervous wreck I must’ve appeared to her. Instead, she covered her mouth and giggled.

“...Sorry. Maybe I am overprotective, worrying like that.”

“I think Theresia is so taken with you exactly because that’s the kind of man you are. Even if she can’t talk, I can still tell. She looked restless without you.”

“I see... Thing is, I think our relationship might change once we do free her from that demi-human mask.”

“You think...she’ll pull back from you?”

“I think that’d be only natural. Not that I can say anything with confidence about what she used to be like before...”

“...We just need to advance one more district to finally get a clue about how to return her to normal. I can’t wait to talk to her, either... But to do that, first...”

I shared Elitia’s sense of urgency. But if we wanted to move forward, we needed to first train ourselves properly to meet the higher demands.

“Arihito, it looks like I got extra skill points for transitioning into my new job... See that +5? Do you mind if I get your input on what skills to take?” she asked, then showed me her license, sitting not across from me but at my side.

Part II: Progress

I examined the screen displaying all of Elitia's skills. She'd seemed nervous the last time she'd shared it with me, but now, if anything, she looked a little bashfully proud.

◆Acquired Skills◆

Double Slash

Slash Ripper

Rising Thunder

Blade Ronde

U Luminous Flow

Armor Break

Parry

Slice 1

Counter Slice 1

U Star Parade

Air Raid

Sonic Raid

Comet Raid

Secrets of the Sword 2

Dual Wield

U Ultimatum

U Asterisk

◆Available Skills◆

Level 3 Skills

Liberation: Unlocks a sword's true potential when attacking. Weapon used will not break, regardless of its durability.

(Prerequisite: Secrets of the Sword 2)

Blade Maiden: Evolved form of Bloody Roar skill. Unleashes sword strikes that increase in power in correlation to user's vitality. The more vitality allies lose, the greater the boost in attack power.

Level 2 Skills

Cross Slash: Unleashes a powerful attack using weapons equipped in both hands. (Prerequisite: Dual Wield)

Hit and Away: Increases evasion when hit with a counterattack. Boosts accuracy of indirect attacks against foes.

Deadly Angle: Doubles weak spot damage to a monster.

Backslash: Occasionally eliminates the pause after one attack before the user can attack again. Acquired from: ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

Holy Warrior Stance: Allows user to equip Holy Warrior-specific armor and weapons.

Zone Fending: Attacks every enemy within range and inflicts knockback on those hit. While not very powerful, it occasionally allows the user to activate a follow-up attack before enemy.

(Prerequisite: Fencer Step)

Level 1 Skills

Pierce 1: Attacks pierce straight through target when using a thrusting-type sword.

Weapon Break: Targets the opponent's weapon to reduce its durability when user equips certain types of swords.

Maintenance: Allows you to know in advance when equipment will

break and perform emergency repairs if you have the proper tools.

Feats of War: Increases experience points and dropped loot rate when you defeat the enemy's leader.

Fencer Step: Increases evasion rate when a stabbing sword is equipped. Unfailingly evades the first physical attack after activation.

Remaining Skill Points: 1 (+5)

"Wow... This is incredible, don't you think...?"

Apparently, you didn't need to use any skill points to acquire the more advanced version of a skill if something external caused it to evolve. That alone would've been enough to shock anyone, but Elitia had also learned a skill from the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper. Perhaps that meant you could sometimes take a skill after defeating an enemy who wielded the same weapons as you.

"...You've worked so hard to earn this, you know."

"N-no, I...", she stammered, embarrassed. "All these skills just popped up once I stopped being a Cursed Blade..."

"Yeah, and the new ones all look very impressive. Those evolved ones have a 'U' in front of their name... I've never seen that before."

"Someone once told me that 'U' shows up in front of skills you can't typically acquire, but...I think it must designate the ones that reach a higher level. Scarlet Dance turned into Star Parade, and Red Eye became Asterisk, and you can see the 'U' in front of both of them."

"Makes sense... What's the difference between Asterisk and Red Eye?"

"I used to have to get blood on me for Red Eye to activate...so maybe Asterisk needs some special catalyst, too. I'll probably get a better feel for it next time I activate it."

Though Elitia's previous skills used to augment her capabilities at the cost of vitality or magic, she'd now broken free of any downsides and fully stepped into her role as an attacker.

"...I'm so glad."

“Huh...? Wh-what’s wrong, Arihito? Why do you look so mysterious all of a sudden...?”

“I was always worried what it would do to you to keep using Berserk and Red Eye... But we wouldn’t have made it this far without you, though I know it’s self-serving to rely on you and still hold on to those concerns.”

“...That’s not true.”

For a long while now, I’d had a nagging fear deep down; I was sure that every time she drew from the power of her Cursed Blade, it whittled away at something inside her. And yet whenever we made it safely through all those obstacles, I swept that anxiety out of sight.

“I... After I left District Five, I tried working with three different parties. First, I tried finding people who would help here but had no luck. So I went down to District Six and joined one party there, then down to District Seven, where I tried two others. I even asked the Guild for advice in District Seven, and they introduced me to one of the two, but...it never went well.”

“I had no idea...”

“Yeah... But it was all my fault. I tried at first to keep the truth about this sword secret and told myself it wasn’t a big deal if the blade took control of me... But once the District Six party saw me in Berserk mode, they told me they never wanted to work with me again.”

Elitia went on to say that this party decided to raid a labyrinth rumored to have a Named Monster, possibly because they figured that, with her, they had an additional, powerful attacker on their side. However, fighting that Named Monster pushed Elitia into Berserk mode. Once she’d regained her sense of self, she realized she was all alone; the rest of her party had used a Return Scroll to escape, leaving her behind.

“But I don’t blame them for it. Everybody said the same thing when they saw me with the Scarlet Emperor... things like, ‘I’d never want that kind of person in my party.’”

Someone saw her leaving the labyrinth covered in the monster’s blood and, assuming she must’ve attacked her party, started calling her the Death Sword.

After that, the name stuck.

“I completely ran out of magic and fainted. The next time I came to, I was in the Guild’s Healing Center, my arms and legs tied to the bed... Once they realized I’d snapped out of it, though, they undid the restraints.” That was when the Guild informed her she’d been kicked out of her party.

Elitia had never opened up about what exactly she’d gone through before joining our group. Even so, I’d thought I could empathize with her experience and understand a little of the loneliness she must have felt. But I couldn’t have been more wrong. No amount of imagination could have given me even a taste of what she had suffered.

“I started to think I’d never be able to accomplish anything. Sure, I fought Named Monsters, but I put my survival above all else and fled while I still had no idea what I was doing. I knew if I kept that up, I’d gain nothing and just keep making the situation worse for myself.”

She commanded power exceeding other Seekers of a similar level and could stand her ground against much stronger Named Monsters—but only after losing control of her own actions by activating that Berserk. She needed partners she could trust who would help her take any monsters she defeated back with them when they left the labyrinth.

“It’s called a Cursed Blade, but the sword knows that nothing will matter if its owner dies. It tried to keep me alive...but I couldn’t gain anything as a Seeker as long as I relied on that. I’d never grow or even find real friends...”

“...And yet you didn’t give up,” I reminded her.

“No, I didn’t... I went down another level to District Seven and looked for a party. By that point, I’d stopped telling people what I was working toward and had to focus on raiding labyrinths just to sustain myself. Soon enough, though, rumors about the Death Sword caught up with me.”

After that, she actually did give up on the idea of going to District Eight for a while since one of the parties she’d fought with in District Seven had been sent back down after proving incapable of fighting the monsters in the district. Once she went for it, though, that same party spotted her at the Guild and started spreading those awful Death Sword rumors behind her back.

Why did all these people she'd worked with hold her in such contempt?

Elitia answered that question herself. "...My brother never had any intention of letting me run away with my sword."

"You mean he was the one who made sure that terrible reputation followed you all the way to District Eight?" I asked, incredulous.

"By the time I realized it, stories of the Death Sword were spreading like wildfire," she replied quietly.

"How could they ever talk so badly about one of their own, the person they entrusted to use a sword they'd found...? That's unforgivable, no matter what the reason."

"...Thanks. The truth is, I never dreamed I'd get to return to this district so quickly. I thought I had no other choice but to slowly work my way back up."

The resolution behind that decision was exactly what had led Elitia to team up with Suzuna, only a level-1 Seeker, and start training her in the beginner labyrinths. She knew they would skip no districts and could only progress step by step—but she would do it, determined not to let Berserk take her over again.

"It was only after teaming up with Suzuna that I felt like I had a right to keep living. After all my other parties shut me out, I thought I'd be alone forever."

"Well, I guess it's pretty lucky we met you, then."

Elitia's eyes welled with tears. She reached for my hand, where I held her license—but stopped herself before touching me.

"What if I...?"

"...If we're going to go down 'what if' rabbit holes, I'd much rather talk about what might happen after we safely take down the Simian Lord."

I knew full well how committed she was, even though we couldn't hang our hopes on anything "definite," no matter how strong we got. Even so, I couldn't help but hope and search for a future where we all *definitely* survived.

"...It looks like getting this new job gave me extra skill points," she said quickly, switching gears. "Do you mind if I take Liberation and Backslash?"

“Blade Maiden works best only when the rest of us have lost a lot of vitality... I guess that is pretty risky.”

“Exactly. But I’m sure my blade will answer to my call now.”

“Right... Yeah, I bet you’re right. Okay, let’s go with those two.”

Toggling the license with her pointer finger, Elitia acquired the two skills. Afterward, I pointed to the Feats of War skill.

“You’re much more advanced in level than the rest of us, which makes it harder for you to build up experience points... With that in mind, I think it’d be a good idea to take this Feats of War, too. You could also choose Break Weapon instead, if you think you can use it with the swords you have now.”

“Apparently, you need a special Sword Breaker-type blade for that... But you’re right, I’ll take Feats of War, too.”

I wanted to keep one eye on the future. The battle with the Simian Lord would not be the end for us—it was an important goal, one stage of our journey.

“Thanks for listening, Arihito. Good night.”

“Sure thing. Sleep tight.”

With that, Elitia left the living room. I finished the water in my glass and took a deep breath. Just then, Falma and Theresia came walking in together.

“Hello again, Mr. Atobe. Regarding your treasure chests, when would you care to handle the opening?”

“As early as possible. I was hoping we could do it tomorrow morning. We have two Black Boxes and just today found a Red Box.”

“Oh my... Red Boxes in and of themselves are incredibly precious... My heart pounds like a schoolgirl every time I see you, Mr. Atobe. I hope you’ll forgive me for not exactly acting my age.”

“N-not at all. Actually, aren’t you younger than me...?”

“Oh...? I-is that right? Then I’ve truly been quite rude to you all this time... But of course, as you say, you did tell me your age. How did I get so confused...?”

“Oh, no, not in the least. If anything, I know I can’t exactly deny I’m a bit neurotic for my age...”

“I can tell you that is patently false. I’ve thought you quite well put together for someone younger than myself... But in that case...”

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

I’d thought Falma had forgotten all about how she offered to scrub me down in the baths since she had been drunk. If she still had even a little of that memory, though, it would make things a bit awkward.

“...Would you mind greatly if I continued speaking with you as I have so far? I’ve always regarded you as a younger brother, so... I-I’m sorry, I know this is quite a selfish request.”

“If that’s what you prefer, it’s fine by me.”

“Thank you very much. Well then, I’ll head to my lodgings for this evening. Good night, Mr. Atobe. And good night to you, too, Theresia.”

“.....”

Theresia nodded, then pattered over to me. She remained standing, and this closeness made me feel like things were back to their old ways.

“...Mr. Atobe, may I have a moment?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for all your hard work today, Louisa.”

Louisa had walked in just as Falma left. She took a seat across from me, smiled warmly at Theresia, then examined my license, which I’d left on the table.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’ll review your results.”

◆Expedition Results◆

- > Raided 1F through 3F of TWILIGHT LAKESIDE STROLL: 30 points
- > MADOKA grew to level 5: 50 points
- > Defeated 2 ICE REMNANTS: 200 points
- > Captured 1 ALTARGEIST: 440 points

- > Defeated 1 ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER: 3,600 points
- > Captured 1 LAMIA OF THE DEEP: 400 points
- > Party members' Trust Levels increased: 270 points
- > Fought alongside NATALIA's party: 10 points
- > Rescued NATALIA: 100 points
- > Rescued LEONARD: 100 points

Seeker Contribution: 5,200 points

District Five Provisional Contribution Ranking: 302

"You've taken a great stride toward earning the five-star labyrinth requirements... So great, in fact, it's set my heart aflutter."

"Thank you very much. Looks like defeating a Named Monster can really move you up the rankings even in District Five, too."

"Of course. Seekers in this district earn an average of two thousand contribution points per expedition, give or take a few hundred."

"I imagine you have some limits as to what information you can share with me about other parties, but... Do you know how many contribution points the White Night Brigade tends to earn?"

"You mean the currently highest-ranked party in District Five? Though they do not embark on expeditions very regularly, they earn a vast amount of contribution points whenever they conduct a raid. It appears they earned close to ten thousand points on their last venture."

As things stood, we'd have to compete against the White Night Brigade to move on to District Four. However, they could always advance before us as well.

"According to the Brigade, they have not yet taken the promotion exam as they feel they still need to prepare for it... However, if a party lingers too long at the number one spot, they can be temporarily removed from the rankings."

"Oh...I see. I'd bet they do already have what it takes to advance, though."

"They may very well be waiting for something. As I understand it, they have

parties that essentially act as subordinate groups in lower districts...though I'm afraid that is all the information I am privy to with my current authorization level."

"That's more than enough, thank you. It's given me quite a lot to consider." Louisa smiled, one hand lightly resting against her chest. Suddenly, it hit me. "You're not using your monocle?"

"N-no... I just took a bath. But I can see up close well enough without it," she explained, then lifted her hand to adjust said monocle—only to realize it wasn't there. With an abashed smile, she said, "...Well...I suppose I should return to the bedroom. It's quite late."

"Thank you again for everything, Louisa," I told her casually.

She shot up, came over to my side—then leaned in so her nose almost brushed my ear and whispered, "It's much easier to see if I'm this close."

"L-Louisa...?"

"Tee-hee... Good night, Mr. Atobe. And to you, Theresia," she said in parting, then headed for the bedroom.

Watching her walk away, I noticed her nightgown, though loose and airy, still somehow accentuated all her curves.

I got up as well and turned down the lights. Madoka always went to bed early, so I'd have to review her skills in the morning. Any discussions about the materials and magic stones we'd picked up would have to wait until then, too.

"....."

Theresia's gaze bored into me, leaving me somewhat unsettled. But I had to tell her.

"Theresia, I think you should go sleep in a bed with the others tonight. You've been through a lot today."

"....."

For a while, she didn't respond in any way—or so I thought. In fact, she'd slowly made her way over to the sofa across from me. The image of her as we left the labyrinth flashed back to mind.

She stared at me, saying nothing.

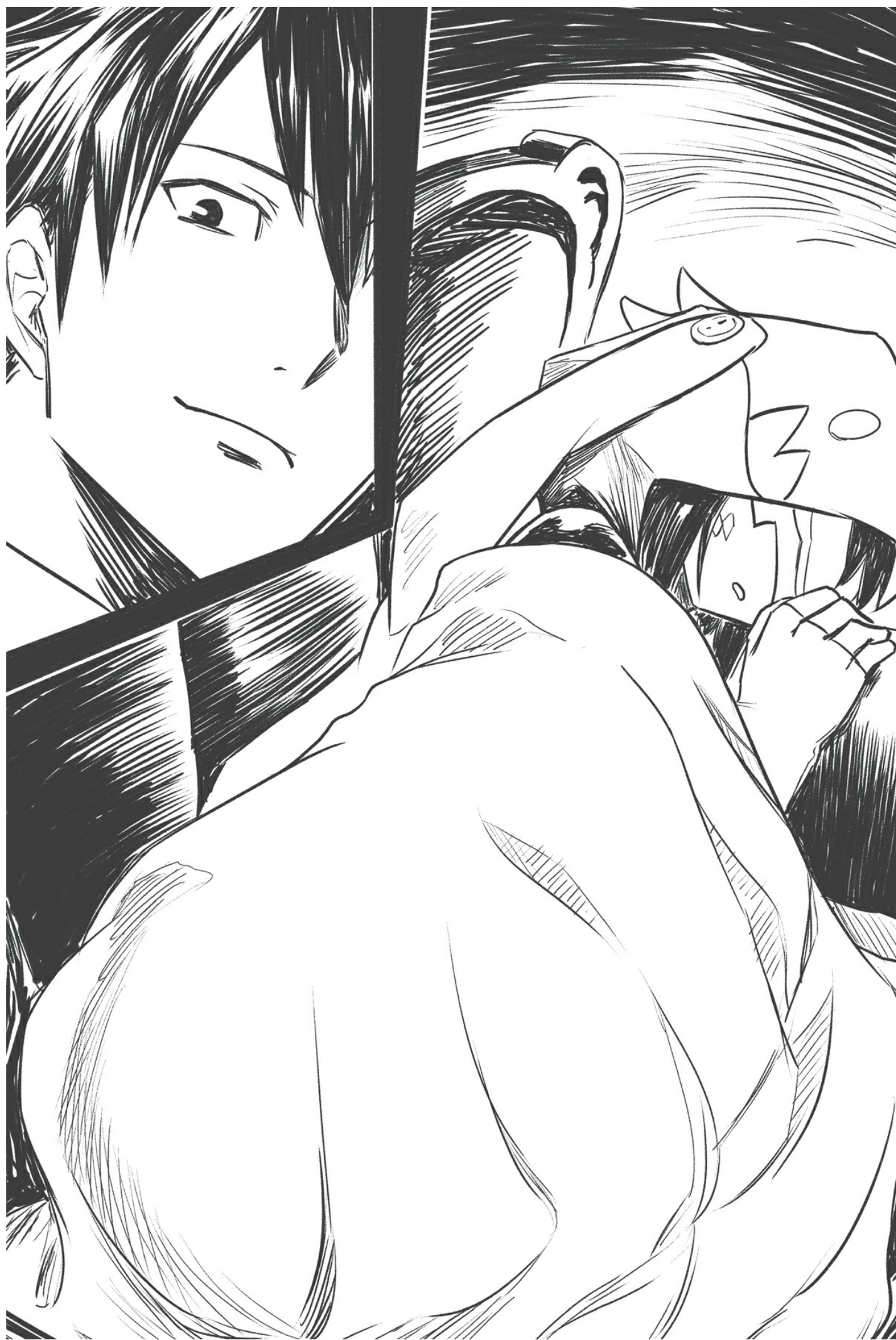
“.....”

Hearing movement, I thought she'd gotten up again, but I realized she had actually stretched out on the couch. I brought a blanket over and covered her with it.

“...To be honest, it's really comforting for me to have someone with me when I sleep. That's what it was like when I was a kid.”

“.....”

“Hm...?” For a second, it looked like Theresia's lips had moved. Of course, I heard no sounds come from them, though. “...You sleep tight, too, Theresia. Good night.”



I lay down on my back and closed my eyes. After a little while, I peeked over at Theresia and saw she'd curled up into a ball, her chest rising and falling slowly in her sleep.

Part III: Call to Arms

Morning dawned on our third day in District Five. I was in the living room getting ready when Maria from the Forest Diner and her assistant came in to prepare breakfast. The two brought sandwiches along with some finger food we could all share, and also warmed up some consommé for us in the kitchen; personally, I thought it held its own even when compared to the delicious Chinese herb-infused soup served at the Refreshing Heaven Restaurant.

“Thank you so much for all of this, Maria. I didn’t expect you to cook for us here, too...”

“It’s vital to have something warm to fill your stomach with in the morning, after all.”

“These are the fruits we picked up in the Islet of Illusion,” Madoka announced shyly, showing Maria the box where we kept them.

After counting and checking the contents, Maria handed me a signed memo and said, “As you’ll see on your receipt, I’m collecting one Herculean Walnut, two Apples of Wit, and one Nimble Grape.”

“Perfect, thank you.”

“I plan to prepare them during the day, then deliver the finished products this evening. Until then, if you’ll excuse us.” With that, Maria bowed and left for work.

Though Madoka had seemed quite nervous during the interaction, she perked up, suddenly remembering something, and pulled her license out of her bag.

“Arihito, I’ve gotten a few new skills...”

“Oh right. You leveled up, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. Would you mind maybe looking at them with me, please?”

◆New Available Skills – MADOKA◆

Level 2 Skills

Custom Carrier: Increases cart speed when hitched to a horse or other such draft animals. Alternatively, imbues cart with special attack Oxen Blast when loaded with a designated weapon.

(Prerequisite: Cart Proficiency 1)

Safe Ride: Makes it more difficult for enemies to hit allies riding on user's cart. Cart absorbs attacks aimed at its passengers. Effect gradually diminishes against repeated attacks from the same enemy. (Prerequisite: Cart Proficiency 1)

Appraise 2: Appraises unidentified tools. Slightly reduces chance of inaccurate assessment. (Prerequisite: Appraise 1)

Negotiate Price 2: Enables user to buy or sell items at an appropriate price that falls within the other party's desired conditions. (Prerequisite: Negotiate Price 1)

Level 1 Skills

Cart Proficiency 1: Increases speed when traveling with a cart.

Remaining Skill Points: 5

"I think maybe it might be a good idea to take Appraise 2. N-Negotiate Price 2 sounds like it could maybe be useful if we have to make a big purchase...b-but I'll only really know for sure if I try it out, so...," she timidly squeaked, stumbling a bit over her words.

"I understand. No need to be nervous. You're probably right—but I wonder how much of a difference Negotiate Price 1 makes."

"Based on our past purchases, we've saved this much," she said, showing me some figures.

Without exception, the items we purchased through Madoka cost about 10 percent less, and those she sold for us went for a 10 percent greater price. All in all, we came up about two thousand gold in the black.

"I'd definitely go for that if we had a few more skill points to work with...," I told her. "Honestly, though, I'm surprised at how many skills Merchants have

related to handling carts.”

“T-true... Do you think maybe, if I got a few of them, I could one day possibly help fight...?”

“As long as we can make sure you’d be safe, I think you could certainly step up in key moments. That said, we’ll handle most of the fighting.”

“O-once our cart is finished...y-you’re going to load the weapon on it, right? I think it might maybe be a good idea to have Custom Carrier and Safe Ride when we do.”

Clearly, Madoka had already made up her mind to help us tackle the Simian Lord, carrying in her cart the Queen’s Tail, our special weapon.

“I think we should start with Cart Proficiency 1 and Custom Carrier. Those are both pretty impactful choices.”

“Y-yes, but...when I first read these skills, it felt like anybody who comes to the Labyrinth Country can someday get powers that let them battle together with their party members...I—I mean the cart skills, n-not me per se...”

“That’s true. Just because you’re a Merchant doesn’t necessarily mean you have to specialize in skills that have nothing to do with battle.”

“D-do...do you really...think so...? Y-you don’t think...I’d just hold everyone back if I fought with you?” she stammered nervously.

“No, I don’t. We’d just have to focus on keeping you out of the line of fire. As long as we can make sure to put the right safeguards in place ahead of time, I have no doubt there’ll be plenty of opportunities where we could use your help, Madoka.”

Our brave Merchant had very few skills to prepare her for the battlefield, and physically she was about as strong as you’d expect a young girl her age to be; even so, with the right armor and in the right circumstances, she could provide decisive power. And if that didn’t seem doable, the cart itself opened up so many possibilities.

“...I promise I won’t be a scaredy cat. I want to be able to fight...!”

“That means a lot, Madoka.”

In the end, she acquired three skills: Appraise 2, Cart Proficiency 1, and Custom Carrier. We also decided she'd pick up Safe Ride as well at some point to reduce the danger our friends faced aboard her cart.

"Our cart should be ready tomorrow, so I was thinking of opening the treasure chests today," I told her.

"All right, I'll let Falma know," she said, then went to report to the Chest Cracker in her separate accommodation.

"...Can I go with you today?" Melissa asked quietly.

She'd spent the night with her parents, but once morning came, her mother had returned to her party and Rikerton got to work dissecting the Cursed Water Serpent Worshipper.

"Yeah, I was hoping you could tag along to let Cion rest up. Are you all set?"

"Whenever you are. I already sharpened my tools," she informed me, licking her lips as she did. She had very clearly perked up after the visit with her mother.

Knowing we could be dragged into a battle with another Hidden God part the moment we opened either of the black treasure chests, I held a meeting with my party before breakfast to discuss the risks.

"I'm ready to go, Atobe."

"Oh man, I always get major tingles before we open a treasure chest. Even though it almost always means we're in for a world of hurt."

"We never do know what's going to happen, Misaki, so we have to be ready for anything..." Suzuna reminded her friend.

Once we had all our ducks in a row, we set out for the day. Theresia came along, too; though she'd looked a little off the previous night, she'd had a hearty appetite for breakfast and now seemed like her usual self.

"I'm counting on you again, partner," I told her. "Let's get going."

Theresia nodded, then pitter-pattered over to my side.

"....."

Once she got close, Theresia caught hold of my sleeve. If the others noticed, they tactfully pretended not to. Matching my pace to Theresia's, I headed for the housing complex lobby.



We met up there with Falma, then used the nearby teleportation shed to move to a special room for chest cracking. This one was just as strange as the previous chest cracking rooms; the dedicated area had a lofty ceiling so high, we couldn't even see where it ended. And while the dim lighting made it hard to see much, we could tell the walls were pretty far away. As always, entering this vast area that held nothing but a single door felt extremely surreal.

"Would you like to begin with a red or a black treasure chest?" Falma inquired.

"Right—would you please open the red one first?"

"As you wish. Now then, I'm going to check for any traps. Please step back."

◆Current Status◆

> FALMA activated ASSESS 3

> Assessed RED BOX for traps → Success

Trap: Teleportation Seal

Trap Level 3

> FALMA activated SLEIGHT OF HAND 4: Successfully diffused traps on RED BOX

"Ngh," she lightly moaned. "I've disabled the trap, which produced a Warp Lock Trap Cube. Would you care to keep it?"

"Those are the ones that stop you from using a Return Scroll, right?" Elitia noted. "It's very dangerous and sometimes gets entire parties killed, so I don't exactly love the idea of it, but..."

"True. But it's not that bulky so I guess I'll hold on to it."

◆Chest Opened◆

Red Box: Acquired from ★CURSED WATER SERPENT WORSHIPPER

- > Water serpent scales x3
- > ?Silver-colored choker
- > ?Thin, translucent scrap of cloth
- > Gold coins x320
- > Silver coins x188
- > Copper coins x52
- > White olden kingdom coins x12

After putting the Trap Cube away, I started inspecting the red chest's contents. I found a few items of equipment mixed in among several hundred gold, silver, and copper pieces, plus an ancient currency I'd never seen before.

"These white coins are from the ancient kingdom," Falma explained. "While you can't use them as currency, you can sell them at the antique market for quite a sum. At the moment, I believe one white coin goes for about fifty gold coins."

"Sounds like some primo moolah! Sayyy, Arihitooo, mind if I hold on to those?"

"Well, I guess old coins are up a Gambler's alley. Sure, you can take a few."

"Awww yeaah! I got the Arihito stamp of approval! Wait, Suzu, isn't cold hard cash a big deal for Shrine Maidens, too?"

"Do you mean for offerings? True, they're an important way to show the gods our thanks. I wonder if Ariadne would appreciate it if we presented some of these coins to her?"

"All alms offered in my name, monetary or otherwise, hold great value," I heard Ariadne tell me. So basically, anything we proffered to her in the Reliquary could help raise our devotion levels.

"Arihito, w-would you mind if I tried appraising the items we found?" Madoka asked shyly, but with excitement.

"Of course not. Go right ahead."

“So you acquired Appraise 2, Madoka...? My, how wonderful,” said Falma.

“Y-yes. Thank you so much for letting us purchase those appraisal scrolls from you all this time...!”

“Think nothing of it. I should be thanking you.”

After thanking Falma, Madoka carefully walked up to the two unidentified items buried amid the piles of coins, making sure to keep her distance when she activated the skill. We never knew what curses or other surprises these mystery items might transfer with a single touch.

First up, the silver-colored choker. A red jewel, smaller than a magic stone, adorned the necklace, clearly some type of accessory.

◆★Brísingamen◆

- > Protection Type: Demi-humans

- > Reduces damage inflicted by humanoid monsters.

- > Increases agility.

- > When wearer is hit with a fire-attribute attack, necklace can activate Fire and Heat Protection with a low chance of a success. Necklace will be damaged after activation and require repair before it can be used again.

- > Can be worn only by women of sword-wielding vocations.

“Wow...,” I marveled. “This will come in handy when we go up against the Simian Lord.”

Given the occupational requirements, this item was basically tailor-made for Elitia. The only downside was not knowing for certain if the Fire and Heat Protection would activate, but its other qualities alone made it worth wearing.

“This cloth... I doubt we can use it as is, but I wonder what it’s made of. It’s so beautiful...,” Igarashi murmured, referring to the other unidentified item, an airy, light piece of fabric. We obviously had to wait for the appraisal to touch it, but I could understand why Igarashi was so drawn to it.

◆★Heavenly Maiden's Raiment◆

- > Consumes magic to reduce damage from enemy attacks.
- > Reduces magic consumed for skill activation.
- > Carries All-Attribute Relief 1.
- > Greatly increases evasion capabilities.
- > Enables user to activate Heavenly Wing.
- > Limits other equipment that can be used simultaneously.
- > Can only be equipped by those who meet the requirements.
- > Currently damaged. Effects cannot be used.

"A raiment... So it's a kind of gown, huh? Looks like we'll have to repair it before anyone can use it," I noted.

"Oooh, Arihito, you should see the super-intent look on your face... Speaking of which, check out how see-through this thing is! Why didn't you tell us this is what you're into? We could've *gah*—"

Igarashi forcefully cut in. "Don't tease him, Misaki. Do you think Heavenly Wing lets you fly...?"

"We can always call on the Harpies if we need to fly, but I imagine we'd find lots of use for it if it gave one of you ladies the capability to do so on your own."

Once assured it was safe to touch, Misaki put her hand up against it to see exactly how sheer it was. It wasn't exactly transparent but came very, very close. Whoever wore it after we got it repaired would need quite a lot of courage.

The water serpent scales look useful for modifying equipment. I'll have to ask Ceres about them later. And now, for the main event—the Black Boxes.

We decided to start with the chest The Calamity had dropped. As Falma raised her hand over the Black Box, a different, cubical Dimensional Barrier Lock rose into the air and began to expand.

"This bad boy...it's playing very hard to get... But it is leading me..."

As Falma threaded her magic through the maze, unlocking stage after stage of the barrier, it suddenly exploded with light. The next second, the maze took on a shape we'd never seen before, like a scrambling Rubik's Cube.

"...Something's wrong...!" Falma choked out.

"It's moving... Atobe...!"

The Dimensional Barrier Lock entirely transformed before our very eyes, as if someone was reshaping it.

"Trap teleportation activating. It is pulling you not into the Trap Cube but into a lost labyrinth," Ariadne warned.

...! So it's a Hidden God part...?!

"Oh, no you don't...! I won't let...anything take...Mr. Atobe and his friends... Not like this...!"

Falma desperately tried to keep up with the shifting maze, but her magic got no closer to the exit and instead slowly but surely got driven into a corner.

"This is a sign we are qualified to acquire a new armament. The next part is calling for us," Murakumo whispered.

"...Falma, we'll be okay! I promise we'll come back—don't worry...!" I yelled.

"Mr. Atobeeee.....!" she cried as the maze crafted a dead end, cornering her magic in a cul-de-sac.

".....!"

Someone ran over to me—Theresia, who'd stood a short distance away. The moment I caught her in my arms, my vision turned white. I could hear my friends' voices—but I knew we'd be okay. We'd overcome every single obstacle in our path, no matter how unexpected.

"It draws near... Another Hidden God part. My devotees...I must put you through this trial...," Ariadne told us, her voice somehow mournful.

It's all right. We'll make it...I promise...! I reassured her.

The Black Box itself was not behind this; another armament slumbering within had chosen to summon us. Memories of our battles against Murakumo and

Alphecca flashed in my mind's eye. This armament could prove significantly stronger. But if we acquired it, it would be a huge step forward for our party, and for Ariadne as well.

My consciousness battered by the violent shock of transportation, I prayed with all my heart that when my vision returned, I'd see my friends safe and together we would defeat this trial.

Part IV: The Ravine

A gentle breeze caressed my cheeks. When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a deep ravine bordered on both sides by towering precipices. I craned my neck to see the tops of the cliffs but found they jutted seemingly forever, carving out a slice of the sky.

A thin layer of sand covered the ground at my feet, speckled with what appeared to be white, glittering crystals. The place reminded me somehow of the Beach of the Setting Sun, but my license listed it as an “unregistered location with no information to display.”

“...Are you all okay?” I asked the group.

I had Theresia at my side and could see Elitia, Igarashi, Suzuna, Misaki, and a little farther away, Seraphina and Melissa.

“Looks like only the eight of us in the active party got sent here...,” Elitia noted.

“Arihito, I heard Ariadne say something,” Suzuna told us. “Do you think that might have something to do with why we were transported here?”

“Yeah, there’s almost definitely an armament in this dimension. Last time we ran into one while exploring the Trap Cube, but apparently this one brought us to it...”

“You mean...because we now have Murakumo and Alphecca working with us?” Elitia asked.

“Correct. However, while I am a Stellar Sword...a weapon fit for a Mechanical God, I believe what lurks here is such a deity’s frame,” Murakumo explained.

Given that everyone in the party seemed to hear her, I asked my next question aloud, directing it to where she hung on my back.

“Ariadne already has a body, though. Is that different from her frame?”

“All Hidden Gods possess a primary corporeal form with which to engage with

the outside world. In addition, they can don an external frame which allows them to participate in battle. It is, in essence, a suit of armor.”

“I see... So it works differently from how we’ve been borrowing Ariadne’s power, right?”

“Indeed. Though dependent on devotion levels and with the exception of the fleeting period during which they can manifest, Hidden Gods possess unparalleled battle prowess. As such, permission to call on their mighty force can be granted only when engaging another Hidden God or an incredibly powerful opponent.”

If we ever faced off against another party blessed with the protection of their own Hidden God, we would be forced to fight—or so we’d learned at the beginning of this journey. Apparently, those very Hidden Gods could also take part in the ensuing confrontation. But if this newest armament would let us call on Ariadne directly during a battle with a powerful monster, it would be almost unbelievably invaluable.

“...Mr. Arihito, do you perhaps have something close to your heart?” Seraphina asked with concern.

“...Oh, this...!” The Merak Crystal I’d put in my suit pocket glowed faintly. After blinking a few times, the light expired. “The sacred operational crystal is reacting. This must have played a part in getting us summoned here.”

“...I sense traces of lingering souls,” Suzuna noted quietly. “Many Seekers must have similarly been called here, and then they...”

Lost their lives.

The trials that Seekers benefiting from the protection of Hidden Gods must endure to assemble their parts were devastatingly intense, cutting short the lives of even the most promising Seekers.

Looking more closely at the sparkling rocks scattered about, I saw they appeared to be shattered crystal fragments—and then:

“A-Arihitooo, wh-what are those...?”

A little up ahead stood a horde of column-like figures, each about as tall as a

person.

“...No...they couldn’t be...,” Seraphina whispered with dread as she approached, though she kept pressing on. Then, a few paces away from the columns, she froze. “...These are statues of Seekers. What devilry could leave them like this...?”

Over a hundred of these statues of human men and women, Seekers of all professions, dotted the area at random.

“Behold, the Seekers who appeared before me, each blessed by divine protection and culled through the trials of their faith.”

A voice rang out. Winding our way through the foreboding statues, we came upon a large, round, stone slab laid out on the ground. In the very center of the circle, we saw a pedestal—and on that, a person-size suit of armor. It had no arms, helmet, or legs, only enough to protect the torso and hips, and seemed to be forged from black stone similar to what we’d seen in Ariadne’s Reliquary. Blue lines raced across its plating—lines that began to glow as if detecting our approach.

“Arihito, the sky...!” Elitia cried.

Light shone down upon the armor, which then started to levitate. That very same instant, a brilliant beam shot up toward the sky as if to pierce the heavens. The curtain of nightfall began to cloak the area, spreading out from the suit of armor as its epicenter. No sooner had we spotted stars scattered throughout the night sky than a flash of blue lightning raced through the armor. It announced its own reanimation.

Stellar Armor awakens; Self-Defense Mode activated.

◆Monster Encountered◆

?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Level 12

In Combat

Dropped Loot: ???

“Wh-what the what...?! It’s floating! Is it gonna come for us...?!” Misaki yelped.

I could only assume the electricity surging through the armor teemed with magic. Even so, we had no other choice but to attack first with a close-up strike. But directly touching this enemy would put us at enormous risk of counterattack—in which case...

“Igarashi, Suzuna, Misaki, I’ll support you!”

““““Okay!””””

“Cooperation Support... Long-Range Attacks!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 2 → Support Type: FORCE SHOT: STUN

> ARIHITO activated FORCE SHOT: STUN

I unleashed the first shot to get our combination rolling, thinking it would be a low-risk option to start with. And yet the very moment I sent the bullet flying, I came to a horrible realization.

—Stars twinkle at the edges of eternity, their light shining like phantom souls.

—

◆Current Status◆

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated MORTAL ENEMY → Immediately countered incoming attacks

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR-STUDDED ASTRAL PROJECTION RING → Added CELESTIAL MAP area effect

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR GAZER → Teleported to separate point within CELESTIAL MAP

> ARIHITO’s FORCE SHOT: STUN lost its target

It not only dodged the bullet, but countered...and disappeared...!

Before I could fully process what looked like a constellation diagram that dotted the floor, before I could even blink, the armor teleported without any warning.

“Huh? Ah—!”

“Misaki!”

The armor disappeared noiselessly; two blinks later, it materialized within point-blank range of Misaki, then shot what looked like a whip made of pure light out from one of its empty arm sockets.

“.....!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: THERESIA, MISAKI
- > ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated BEAM WHIP → Target: MISAKI
- > THERESIA activated ACCEL DASH
- > BEAM WHIP hit THERESIA and MISAKI

Reduced damage to MISAKI

“Eeyaah...!” Misaki screamed. “T-Theresia...!”

“.....! ...Ah...!!”

Theresia softly cried out in anguish. She’d jumped in front of Misaki to protect her from the blow and took the brunt of the electric whip’s lashing.

My Defense Support 1 couldn’t eliminate all the inflicted damage. I had to find another way to completely protect my party members. If that whip of light was the armor’s go-to attack, any more intense offensives could kill us on impact.

How can I shield everyone...? If that whip hits any of our half-back members, they won’t stand a chance...!

“Haaaah!!”

◆Current Status◆

- > SERAPHINA acquired GUARDIAN STANCE → Immediately activated
- > SERAPHINA activated PROVOKE and AURA SHIELD
- > SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Target: ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR
- > ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR GAZER → Teleported to separate point within CELESTIAL MAP

Her shield raised, Seraphina rushed to ram her body into the armor, but the intelligent armament teleported out of range once more and reappeared behind her. However—

“I’m not done yet!”

I should be close enough for my support to reach her—please, give her even just a little more protection!

◆Current Status◆

- > ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: SERAPHINA
- > ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated BEAM WHIP → Target: SERAPHINA
- > SERAPHINA activated SHIELD PARRY → Nullified BEAM WHIP

Accumulated DEFENSIVE BARRIER AURA

“Seraphina, there’s another one!!”

“...Haaah!!”

◆Current Status◆

- > ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated BEAM WHIP → Target: SERAPHINA
- > SERAPHINA activated SHIELD PARRY → Reduced damage from BEAM WHIP

Accumulated DEFENSIVE BARRIER AURA

- > SERAPHINA’S GUARDIAN’S MAIL +4 was damaged

“Krrhh...!”

Electric whips acting as the armor’s hands now protruded from both its right

and its left arm sockets, staggering their attacks and making it extremely difficult to block both. Seraphina acquired then activated Guardian Stance, deflecting the enemy's lashes and building up her Defensive Barrier Aura. That safeguard could protect one of our more lightly armored members or help Seraphina thwart a particularly vicious attack on herself—but I had other things to focus on first.

“Igarashi, Melissa, Elitia!”

“We’ll get you this time...!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated COOPERATION SUPPORT 1 and ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> KYOUKA activated THUNDERBOLT → Target: ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Electrocution reduced

13 support damage

Combined attack stage 1

> MELISSA activated CAT STEP → MELISSA’s evasion rate increased

> MELISSA activated LOP OFF

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR GAZER → Teleported to separate point within CELESTIAL MAP

“.....Grh!”

Melissa’s enormous blade sliced through nothing but air, kicking up a dust storm when it crashed into the ground—but the armor was nowhere to be found, its next appearance delayed for a split second.

“It’s waiting us out so we can’t finish a combination...! But we just have to keep going for it...!” Elitia yelled. “Arihito, give me your original support!”

“Elitia, wait!”

“.....!”

—Unleashing the power dwelling within, my armor secures a moment of freedom.—

“Ms. Theresia!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated DEFENSE SUPPORT 1 → Target: ELITIA, SERAPHINA, THERESIA

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated FLASH PURGE → Target: ELITIA, SERAPHINA, THERESIA

> ELITIA activated COMET RAID → Added SWORD BARRIER

Evaded FLASH PURGE

> SERAPHINA applied DEFENSIVE BARRIER AURA to THERESIA

> FLASH PURGE hit THERESIA

DEFENSIVE BARRIER AURA reduced damage

> SERAPHINA activated DEFENSE FORCE → Reduced FLASH PURGE damage

“Rgh...!”

“.....!!”

“...Ms. Theresia, are you all right...?!”

Several different components combined to form one suit of armor. Dispersing those pieces of its own accord, the intelligent armament then shot them out at bullet speed.

“Theresia, fall back! Or just step outside the Celestial Map! If it hits you again, you’ll...!”

“.....!”

My license showed Theresia had lost more than half her vitality, not because of the curse but because of the staggering difference in level between her and the intelligent armor, and its devastating attacks.

Once again, the suit of armor’s components gathered together, rebuilding themselves into one unit. At this rate, it would just keep teleporting away before we could ever land a significant blow, then bombard us with annihilating

force—and we couldn't let that stand.

“.....”

Theresia... Are you telling me you can still keep going...?

I felt Theresia's strong will come through the pointed look she sent my way. Though she'd never said a word, I'd always convinced myself I could interpret what those gazes meant.

...No, there's no convincing her...I can understand her. I always have—ever since the start...!

As long as the suit of armor stayed within the bounds of the celestial map—like diagram it had spread out over the ground, it would keep activating Star Gazer to instantly teleport away from all our lethal offensives. While Igarashi's Thunderbolt did meet its mark, it inflicted only a fraction of its original force; and even though my support damage had also hit the armor, I had little hope it could chip away enough at the armor to defeat it.

How could we land an attack? There was only one possible solution. It had a limited chance of success, though, and we'd need to rely on a severely injured Theresia to pull it off. Even so, we had to try. But before I could yell my plan to my friends, my heart wailed in distress.

—Those who cannot read the stars shall inevitably sink into a sea of chaos.—

◆Current Status◆

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated AT RANDOM

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR GAZER → Due to effects of AT RANDOM, probability of activation uncertain

We were making undeniable progress—or so I'd thought. Focusing on nothing but defeating the Simian Lord and our future after that, I'd started to see every step in between as goal posts we simply needed to pass. But that kind of carelessness wouldn't fly before a Black Box or the Intelligent Armor.

I could hear all my friends screaming, crying out for me. The reason—out of nowhere, close to ten perfectly identical apparitions of the armor had

materialized before our eyes. Left and right, as quick as a striking serpent, they whipped their sinuous, lashing arms at my party members, who even so, managed to block and dodge the attacks.

“My dear devotee. Having overcome many trials, you have earned the right to reach out in supplication,” Ariadne said, slowly restarting the gears in my mind that had almost slowed to a halt. *“Press on; fear naught. Your chariot rides to you.”*

Yeah... you’re exactly right. We just have to keep living and pressing on—that’s all...!

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO requested temporary support from ARIADNE

> ARIADNE summoned ALPHECCA

“We are Alphecca...the incarnation of Arianrhod.”

Suddenly, the speeding Silver Chariot appeared out of thin air, racing not toward the intelligent armor but to accomplish a feat no other mechanism could ever predict.

“Though ye be our Hidden God’s divine frame...we shall not let thee lay a hand on our Master...!”

◆Current Status◆

> ALPHECCA activated BANISHING BURST → Speed increased and broke through limit

Added FLOATING SPECTER

> ALPHECCA activated OUT OF BODY → 0 damage to party members

> ALPHECCA activated CRESCENT DRIFT → Hit 7 ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR apparitions

Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Apparitions dispelled

“Whooooooooaaa...! Sh-she just literally slipped straight *through* me...!” Misaki shrieked.

Only Alphecca with her precise power to switch between material and incorporeal forms could have executed this powerful attack. Even in her apparitional state, she inflicted magic-powered damage on the suit of armor.

The armor’s At Random skill teleported it, as the name implied, to random spots. My guess was we’d never distinguish between the armor and an apparition until we landed a strike on the real thing. In other words, if we couldn’t remove the extra apparitions, we’d only ever know the real enemy’s location after a blow hit it.

“Master, we await your orders. A suit of armor serves no purpose without a form to protect.”

“We must tell this wayward armament who it is meant to serve, what great power our Master and his companions wield.”

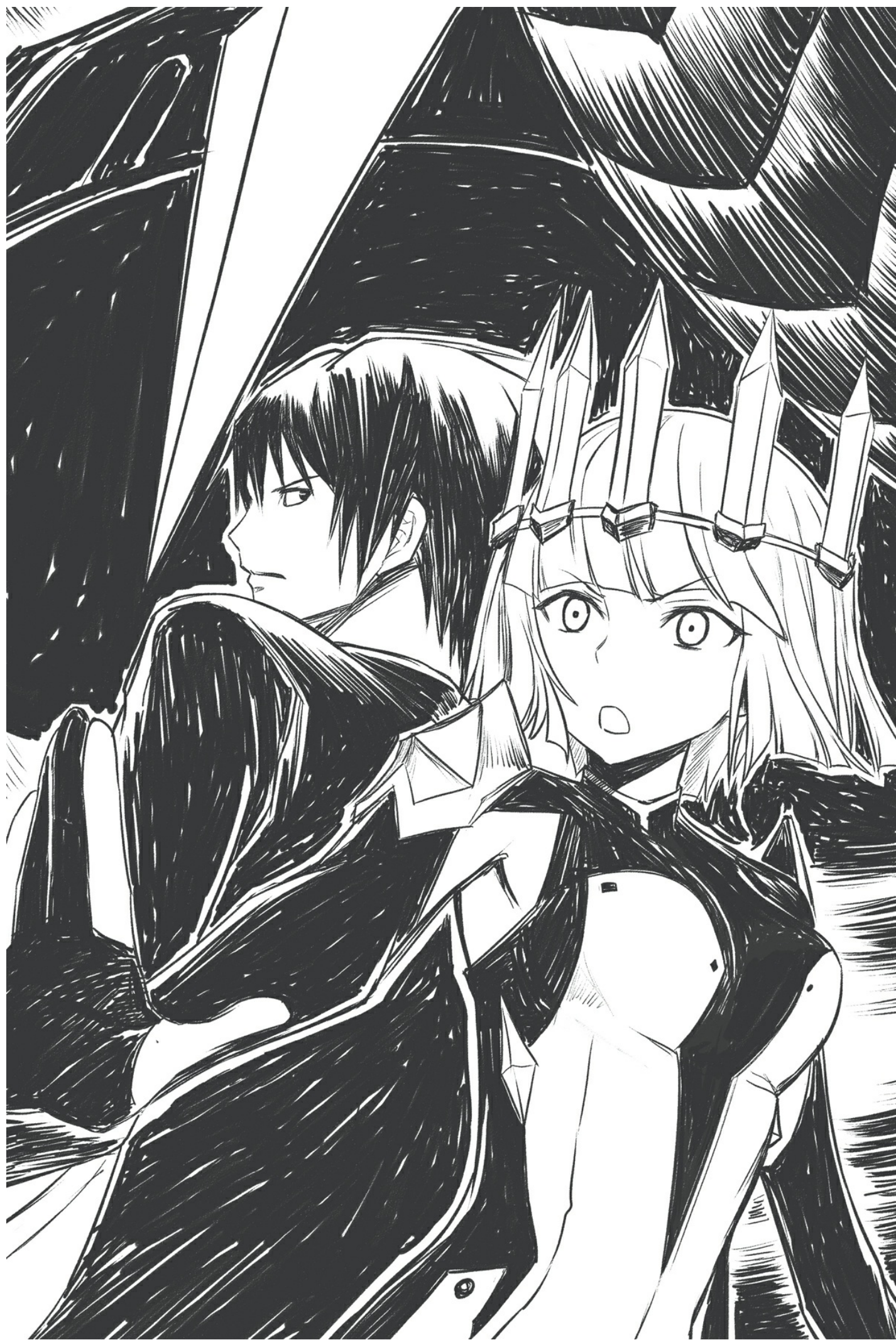
I heard Alphecca and Murakumo speak to me, undaunted by the suit of armor’s menacing strength. If anything, the awesome sight only fanned the flames of their desire to battle.

“I know you’ll be locked in your corporeal form, but please get us all on your chariot. We may pile on way over capacity, but we can’t let that stop us...!”

“Arihito, I can tell them apart! Keep your eyes fixed on me!” Elitia’s voice rang out. If she said she could do it, I had to believe her.

Had she figured out some sort of rule dictating where the armor would next appear, or could she somehow sense it? Our chariot dashed around as I weighed the possibilities, reaching over the sides to pull my friends aboard. Seraphina, the last to join us, took a seat in front, her shield at the ready.

If Alphecca could keep this speed up, we wouldn’t feel the full bite behind any attacks that did hit us. After activating Recovery Support 2, I drank a potion to try to help Theresia, Seraphina, and Misaki sitting in front of me regain vitality. The move managed to somewhat relieve their wounds, but the gashes on Theresia ran too deep to completely heal. Nevertheless, she was out of the woods.



“Mr. Arihito, Ms. Elitia is—!”

“I know... She’s going to succeed—I’m sure of it. So we need to keep all eyes on her...!”

Elitia alone did not hop on Alphecca, instead standing fast on the ground, her Antares raised and her eyes closed.

—In seeking to cross the starry seas, the chariot searches for the dark abyss.—

The suit of armor abruptly began to flicker. Then it activated Star Gazer once more.

“—!”

That same instant, Elitia’s eyes flew open. I could have sworn I saw glittering galaxies reflected in their sheen.

◆Current Status◆

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated STAR GAZER

> ELITIA activated ASTERISK → Detected next spot ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR will appear

> ELITIA activated COMET RAID → Added SWORD BARRIER

> ELITIA activated SLASH RIPPER → Target: ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated AVOID ZERO → Zero damage

Apparition lifted

Elitia’s slashes seemed to hit the armor square on, but they slid across the suit’s plate, finding no purchase and inflicting no damage.

“But I saw her hit it...! This thing doesn’t play fair...!” Misaki whined.

“This Hidden God Armor must wield a formidable defensive skill... However, it must also cost a great deal of magic. If Ms. Elitia can determine where it will appear next, then...”

“We have to make it count. Suzuna, you’re up... Your Auto-Hit should find the right spot even in all this mess.”

“...Okay. I’ll do my part—I promise!”

As the suit of armor kept activating its Star Gazer to dodge Elitia’s attacks, we once again came upon the perfect moment.

—Your swords cut naught but shadow, your blades cannot reach my mighty armor. All your toil is in vain.—

The sentient suit of armor taunted us, trying to douse our will to fight—but Elitia never wavered. Whipping around to slice backward through an apparition that materialized behind her, her eyes flitted over in another direction.

“There!”

Suzuna’s arrow shot through the air following Elitia’s gaze, thrusting into the ground just in front of the next spot the armor showed itself—

◆Current Status◆

> SUZUNA activated AUTO-HIT → Next two shots will automatically hit

> SUZUNA attacked → Failed

—and missed, letting yet another golden opportunity slip through our fingers.

At least, that’s what the armor was meant to think. We knew it would move on to another Star Gazer, this time in combination with At Random.

“Theresia!”

“—!!”

◆Current Status◆

> THERESIA activated ACTIVATE TRAP → Activated WARP LOCK TRAP CUBE

> ?INTELLIGENT WEAPON activated STAR GAZER → Failed

Theresia triggered the Trap Cube we’d attached to Suzuna’s arrow—the very same one we’d only just picked up from unlocking the traps on our Red Box—causing a circular ring to spread out beneath the armor. We’d taken a gamble, unsure if the cube could foil Star Gazer, but we worked together to make it happen and believed in each other.

“Scatter your brilliance in step with my sworded dance, O blade of flowers!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> ELITIA activated ULTIMATUM → Attack power and speed increased

Added SCARLET TRAILS

> ELITIA activated STAR PARADE and LUMINOUS FLOW

> STAR PARADE increased the number of ELITIA’s attacks

> 42 stages of LUMINOUS FLOW hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Added 40 SCARLET TRAILS

> ?INTELLIGENT WEAPON activated AVOID ZERO 42 times → Zero damage

> ELITIA activated additional attacks

28 stages hit

364 support damage

In a terrifying turn, the suit of armor nullified almost the entire barrage of attacks Elitia unleashed upon it, her blade flashing more quickly than the eye could follow—until:

—Antares...the scarlet blade...devastates...the brilliance...of the stars.—

“Ellie’s attacks—they worked...!” Misaki rejoiced.

The suit of armor’s defensive skill that voided all attacks burned through its magic, or perhaps could be used only so many times in a row. After that, not even the rock-hard armor could negate the power of Attack Support 1.

“Arihito! Ladies!” Elitia cried out.

“Let’s go!”

““““Okay!””””

Igarashi, Melissa, and Seraphina leaped off Alphecca and rushed in to attack—and hit the armor with everything they had.

“Cooperation Support—All Out Assault!”

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO activated COOPERATION SUPPORT 1 and ATTACK SUPPORT 1

> MISAKI activated JOKER OF THUNDER → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Failed to anger ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Converted ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR’s weakness to lightning attribute

> ARIHITO activated DARKNESS BULLET → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Weak spot attack

?INTELLIGENT ARMOR was Electrocuted

Combined attack stage 1

> KYOUKA activated LIGHTNING RAGE → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Weak spot attack

Electrocuted state extended

Combined attack stage 2

> LIGHTNING RAGE activated additional attacks → 3 stages hit ?

INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Weak spot attack

Misaki’s Jester’s Wildcards flipped the armor’s resistance against lightning-attribute attacks to its weakness. No one knew for sure if it would work, but if anyone could do it, it was Misaki. And I’d bet the world Igarashi felt the same.

“Haaaah!”

◆Current Status◆

> SERAPHINA activated SHIELD SLAM → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

?INTELLIGENT ARMOR was Stunned

Combined attack stage 3

> MELISSA activated LOP OFF → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Combined attack stage 4

> KOTTO'S GAUNTLETS activated → Added additional DOUBLE DOWN attack

> SUZUNA activated FORBIDDEN ARROW → Hit ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

Combined attack stage 5

> Combined attack JOKER DARKNESS LIGHTNING SLAM FORBIDDEN LOP → Critical hit

Electrocuted state extended

Partial destruction

104 support damage

36 additional cooperation damage

Sparks flew from the armor as the onslaught rained down upon it, Melissa's Lop Off cleaving off the suit's shoulder plate.

Nevertheless, the severed plate floated back into the air, joining the rest of the suit's parts and rearranging themselves as if an actual person were wearing them.

◆Current Status◆

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR activated ARMORED MAIDEN

The suit of armor drew out the last ounce of its strength, a move through which the sentient armament materialized into a corporeal form to fight as a real person would. However, countless red gashes had cleaved into the armor's plates, vestiges of the Scarlet Trails that Elitia's slashes had inflicted upon it. They scratched and scrawled all over the surface like an intricate engraving.

Furthermore, the armor had no magic left to activate Star Gazer or Avoid Zero anymore. As if to prove that point, the armor—no, the specter of a lady knight

now clad in the suit of armor—stood perfectly still.

“...Would you please...lend us...lend Ariadne your strength?” I pleaded.

“.....”

I hopped off Alphecca with Theresia, who had her sword drawn and ready. Elitia also stayed on her guard. The armored maiden said nothing; our silent confrontation continued.

Eventually, though, the armor dropped one knee to the ground like a proper knight would.

“At long last, I have been defeated. I have found my true master... I thank you.”

◆Current Status◆

> Defeated 1 ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

The armor lost all will to fight. As its hostility disappeared, so did the effects of Elitia’s Scarlet Trails. Theresia and Elitia sheathed their swords. Still, the armor hung her head.

“...Raise your head, please. Now that you’ve agreed to help, you’re one of us.”

The armored maiden did as I instructed, then brought her hand to her chest—to a depression made for a Sacred Operation Crystal. After checking with the rest of my party, I inserted the Merak Crystal into the opening. The moment it clicked in, every line etched into the suit of armor began emitting a light blue glow.

◆Current Status◆

> ARIHITO is now owner of ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR

> ?INTELLIGENT ARMOR’s first Inscription is revealed to be FYLGJA

“I am Fylgja, armor to our Hidden God, protector of her devotee.”

“...I do wish I had the chance to test my prowess against Fylgja’s. Nevertheless, no meaning would come from internal conflict between armaments, I suppose,” Murakumo—who knows when she’d appeared—

muttered.

I had the distinct feeling Fylgja would have been out of commission for a good while had Murakumo joined the attack.

With this armament, we'd found yet another heartening addition to the forces with which we'd face the Simian Lord. I was worried about Theresia moving too much with her wounds, but she walked up to me as if she had something to say.

"Great job out there, Theresia."

"....."

Not knowing if this was, in fact, what she wanted, I petted her head—or rather, her mask, which felt indescribably smooth.

"There you go again, Arihitooo, doting oonly on Theresia... Just kidding, we promised not to harp on that. Be sure you remember to show Murakumo and the other armament ladies that same lovin' every once in a while too, okayyy?"

"While I may appear human, my body is composed of naught but magic. Such tokens would have no meaning."

"I object. All tokens from our Hidden God's devotee hold meaning."

"We feel similarly honored simply carrying our devotees. However, a touch upon our human form would register as a touch and nothing more."

As we all watched Murakumo, Fylgja, and Alphecca talk among themselves, I could sense my party members breathe a collective sigh of relief. Would Ariadne be happy to have another ally, too?

I turned inward to ask but received no response. And yet I knew with every fiber of my being that she was looking down on us.

EXCLUSIVE BONUS CONTENT

Ceres's Dream Therapy

I—Kyouka Igarashi—have a little problem. It's nothing new, but ever since I came to the Labyrinth Country, I've had more and more restless nights.

As I attended all-girls schools from high school through college, I had spent very little—actually, if I could drop all pretense—absolutely zero time thinking about relations with men. Suzuna and I could relate on that point, and later when we had the chance to talk privately, we found out we also had similar opinions on men and shared the same *dilemma*.

“Heh-heh... How innocent you young lasses are. Just watching you makes me feel years younger. Let them call me past my prime for all I care.”

“No one calls you that, Master. Has that been eating at you or something?”

“Steiner...or rather, Chiara. I suggest you reign yourself in, or I shall throw you in front of Arihito exactly as you are now.”

“Eek...! Y-you can't! Not that it would mean anything to Mr. Atobe if he saw me...”

One evening, Suzuna and I soaked in the tub discussing our little problem. That's when Ceres and Steiner, who were also taking their baths, cut in. Ellie, Misaki, Madoka, and Theresia had already gone to get changed. Seraphina, on the other hand, was out on her nighttime run with Cion despite the busy day we'd had raiding the labyrinth.

“I don't mean to pry, but...I had no idea there was a real girl under all that armor,” I said to Chiara.

“Yes, at first I believed it was empty since I heard you talk about a Living Armor skill...but once I went up in level, my Shrine Maiden senses grew keener, and I could tell you were inside, Chiara.”

“So you'd noticed, Suzuna. *Haaah...*” The not-actually-living armor sighed.

“There’s no deep meaning to it or anything, but I’m pretty petite, so sometimes Seekers who look a little rough around the edges would come to our forge and tell me flat out they’d never trust a child to do anything for them. That’s when I started going to work wearing the suit of armor my father made.”

“I get the sense you skipped a few parts in the middle there, but...in any case, it’s nice to meet you face-to-face, Chiara,” I told her.

About as tall as Ceres, Chiara was apparently seventeen years old, a year older than Suzuna. To me, she felt like a much younger sister.

“If you don’t mind *me* prying...I always do a double take whenever I work on your equipment, Kyouka.”

“...Kyouka, have your girls gone and grown *again*?” Ceres asked incredulously.

“N-no, I... I’ve been running around so much every day, they should’ve shrunk if anything, no?”

The others never failed to comment on my chest whenever we bathed together. I’m still self-conscious about it, but when I was little, I even tried doing all sorts of exercises to make them smaller. Nothing ever worked, though, so now I tried not to think about it.

Coming to the Labyrinth Country was difficult in a lot of ways, but there were also some good things about it, too—one of them being that either my magic or maybe some special effects in my equipment had almost entirely relieved the heaviness in my chest that had always weighed me down.

“I imagine you’d be hard pressed to find another forge in the Labyrinth Country with more expertise in processing armor to suit your challenging bosom, Kyouka, if I may say so myself,” Ceres boasted.

“I’m sorry to make so much extra work for you...,” I said. “Is that what you were looking for?”

“M-Master, cut that out! You can’t go picking fights with our most important customers!”

“Hmm, yes, that was rather unbecoming of me. You must understand her plight well, Chiara. For one so small, you have quite the voluptuous chest

indeed.”

“Exactly! But at least I don’t have to worry about men leering at me when I’m wearing my armor... Oh, but, um...not that I would worry about Mr. Atobe in that way.”

“T-true... He never looks at Louisa or me like that, either.”

“O-of course. Arihito is a genuinely good man...”

Suzuna and I saw eye-to-eye on this kind of thing, too. If our group conversation ever turned to Atobe, we would often chime in at the same time to back him up—not that anyone ever talked badly about him. Mostly, whenever Misaki would say something like, “I wonder if Arihito’s just, like, not into sexy times,” I’d always make sure to tell her he was attracted to women but just tried not to bring that sort of thing up in the party, or something defensive like that.

At the same time, I was always trying to avoid thinking maybe he just wasn’t interested in me personally. I was never what you’d call a caring boss, and I doubted Atobe had completely left those impressions of me behind.

At the end of the day, he probably likes girls who are patient and welcoming like Louisa, and I mean, I do think I should try to be more like her, but I’m also four years younger than him, so maybe he sees me less as a woman and more as like a little sister figure, and of course, your skin does start to sag a little at twenty-five compared to high schoolers, and maybe Atobe just looks like he’d be into older women but actually has a soft spot for younger girls.

But I mean, I’ve definitely been getting enough exercise ever since I came to the Labyrinth Country, so if anything, I feel just as energetic as a high school girl, and I wouldn’t mind at all if Atobe wanted to think of me as more of a—

No, I can’t go there. Atobe never acted any differently even when I took a shower at the office, plus he’s the type to compartmentalize his work and private matters, and now that we’re working together in the same party, he’ll never think of me as more than a party member, so—

“U-um... Kyouka, are you all right?” Suzuna gently asked.

“H-hmm... I know we tend to soak longer than most, but perhaps we’ve gone

a tad too far...”

“Ah... S-sorry, I’m fine. I just got lost in thought.”

“...You know, I think I will ask after all. Kyouka, show me the talisman you have on, dear.”

“...Um, that’s kind of embarrassing. It’s on my stomach, so...”

“No need to be shy. There is not an inch of your body you should be ashamed of sharing with the world...however crass that may sound.”

Stepping out of the bath, Ceres came over and asked to see my talisman. The Misty Wisps of Spectral Change Charm was stuck to my skin between my chest and belly button with a special kind of seaweed that apparently didn’t disintegrate or come loose in water.

“...Her talisman script has not changed in the least. I swear, who can understand why that woman would agree to my request yet send not even a line in reply?”

“...Sorry to pry, but you and Lynée look so much alike. How do you know each other?” I asked.

“She and I hail from the same birthplace. But please, ask me no more on the subject. You shall learn more in time, I imagine.”

Despite her girlish appearance, Ceres must have lived a much more turbulent life than I ever did. Deep sorrow filled her gaze as she inspected my talisman, though she also seemed to be revisiting something wonderfully nostalgic.

“...I hope you two...if not make up, then have the chance to meet in person one day.”

“I’m much too old for such sentimental rot. It was Lynée who chose to leave first. We have simply trodden our separate paths ever since.”

“You say that now, but...don’t you remember what you told me when you saw Melissa with her mother? You said you envied how they so naturally became a family again as soon as they met. Maybe you and Lynée could have a heart-to-heart and go back to the way things were, too, don’t you think?”

“Watch your tongue, Chiara. Now, enough about me—this talisman. It does

indeed suppress Passion simply by adhering to your skin. In time, Passion 3 will dwindle to Passion 2 and so on until you are completely cured... However, there is one problem.”

“Problem...? Does keeping it on have any side effects or something?”

Ceres’s expression told me I hadn’t guessed exactly right but was also not far off the mark. It felt a little awkward talking to her while she examined my talisman; the top of her head just barely brushed the bottoms of my bare breasts.

“First, although the talisman has suppressed the symptoms of the Ghastly Plague the Altargeist exposed you to, it has not completely healed you yet. It will also give you some protection from other status ailments as well, which we cannot discount. However, if for some reason an attack destroys the talisman, you will instantly suffer the full effects of Passion 3 on the spot. And no one can tell exactly how onerous it will be to create another talisman.”

“I—I had no idea... Do you think I should go to a Healing Center?”

“I daresay not. While there are a few treatment methods for Passion 3, only those with highly advanced healing skills could utilize the more agreeable options. You’d have to resort to alternative treatments.”

Just as I was about to ask about those alternative options, Ceres seemed to read the question on my face and asked me to crouch down to her level. Then, in a quiet whisper, she explained it to me.

“...S-so...I have to satisfy my...I-libido...?”

“.....!” Suzuna looked stricken.

“U-um... It’s not what you think. Everyone has these urges to some degree, but this Passion 3 is messing with mine.”

“In essence, the Altargeist monster likes to send Seekers into a rut. If not treated with care, it can cause parties to fracture and dissolve.”

I knew Ceres explained all this with sincere intentions, and I appreciated it—but once I started thinking about what my own worldly desires would be, it felt like she saw right through me. My knees buckled.

“...Kyouka, are you okay?” Suzuna asked.

“I-I’m fine... Sorry to worry you...”

“I—I wish I could, you know...p-purge those desires for you, but...”

“D-don’t worry about it... Plus, I’m not the only one, right? You must have some, too, Suzuna...”

“It is a burden all young ladies must bear. Loneliness calls upon even gentlewomen such as myself some nights.”

“Um... M-Master, is it just me, or has it been forever since you acted like a regular woman?”

For that one moment, Ceres spoke with a truly sophisticated air; despite her petite, cute demeanor, she assumed a calm and demure aura more like Falma’s.

“In any event, that thirst need not necessarily be quenched in the physical sense. Much like what you call ‘movies’ in your world or like the novels we read in ours, fantasy can at times influence a person’s psychological state just as effectively.”

“Y-yes... I have indeed cried before while watching some emotional movies.”

“Come now, you’ll make me feel like an elderly professor if you speak to me so formally... But never mind that. The pinnacle of human imagination, what you might call the process through which one organizes one’s thoughts and feelings—I’m talking about dreams. Bend that to your will, and you can cure your Passion ailment.”

“S-seriously...? But what kind of dream could...?”

“Should you wish to attempt it, say the word before you head to sleep and I shall assist you. However—what, in fact, you dream of shall be up to you. I confess I cannot even imagine what it might entail.”

It was encouraging to think I could treat this issue in a dream, but given the *kind* of issue, I assumed I’d need to have that *kind* of dream, too.

Still, I’ll be in big trouble if the talisman comes off before I heal... Looks like I don’t have much choice...

And so I decided to ask Ceres for help with some dream therapy. I had to do anything I could to make sure Atobe never found out the things that had been plaguing my mind, no matter how unlikely the possibility.



I'd had a vague feeling my dream would center around my time back at the company. But I was a little off.

I was living in a house in a rural village. My seeking days had been so fruitful, I'd had my pick of homes after retirement. That is, of course, my husband—Atobe—and I had together chosen the house we loved best.

“Hee-hee... Still fast asleep.”

After preparing breakfast, I'd slipped back into our bedroom to wake him. We had a royally huge bed, one with far too much space for only two people. And yet out of all the plentiful room available, Atobe was curled up in one tiny corner of the mattress. I had to laugh at his humility, even in sleep.

It made me think of things I never could have said in the old days, like how adorable I found the small tufts of hair that stuck straight up as he took a nap on the break room couch after pulling another all-nighter. I'd convinced myself comments like that didn't mesh with my public image. Instead, I settled on serving him a cup of steaming coffee as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and giving him a, “good luck today” like a proper boss.

Now, though, I'd traded all that vanity for overwhelming happiness.

“...Mmn... Igarashi...”

“...I told you, I'm not Igarashi anymore, remember? Silly man...”

It was his fault. He shouldn't have murmured my name so sleepily, completely defenseless. He was the one to blame here—but I was even more at fault for thinking he might appreciate seeing me in this getup.

I mean, really, nothing but an apron...? I wouldn't have even dreamed of it if Misaki hadn't said all newlyweds do it...

How would he react? I worried he might roll his eyes, but also knew he was so gentle, he'd never realize I was coming on to him unless I took extreme

measures. I longed to be close to him. Pressing my body against his while we slept couldn't satisfy me anymore.

"Ngh..."

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I kissed Atobe's cheek. He showed no signs of waking, though it did seem to tickle him a little.

He probably won't wake up with another. I can keep going.

Once more I pecked his cheek, careful not to make any noise. Still, he didn't rouse, so I went in for another, and another—eventually I got greedy. I wanted to kiss more than his cheeks, his forehead.

"It's your fault for not waking up, you know..."

"...Kyouka..."

"...Oh, you..."

He softly called my name, just when I needed to hear it most. Even in his sleep, he was a true gentleman.

He must be having a really nice dream. I shouldn't wake him up, I thought, and yet.

"...Just a little more..."

The string tying my apron around my neck came undone. The light filtered in through the curtains, and I hid my breasts with my arm so he could feel free to open his eyes whenever he pleased, and I climbed onto the bed.

"...Kyouka, don't hide anything from me."

"A-Atobe..."

"I thought we agreed we wouldn't call each other by our last names?"

Awake before I even knew it, my husband—Arihito—sat up in bed. Though he usually wore pajamas to sleep, today his taut, rippled chest was bare. I'd loved the way suits had accentuated his neck, the flashes of his wrist I'd glimpse beneath his jacket sleeve. They'd always caught my eye.

But now—I could feast my eyes on more than just passing moments. I had a front row seat to enjoy every inch of my husband.

“U-um...You look amazing,” he stammered. “Sorry, too blunt?”

“...Silly man. You’re supposed to be blunt,” I told him, then gently slid my hand against his cheek and leaned in for a soft kiss. Without releasing his lips, I pushed him back down against the bed, knowing he’d welcome me wholly.

Breakfast today would run late. Arihito slipped his hand around my waist and hugged me tight as if to say, *I’ll never let you go.*

◆Current Status◆

> KYOUKA’s PASSION 3 was lifted



When I awoke the next morning, it felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I vaguely remembered having a nice dream, but couldn’t recall exactly what had happened.

“Good morning, Igarashi.”

“Oh, morning, Arihito.”

“...Wh-what...?”

I’d greeted him as casually as usual, though it felt different for some reason. *Probably just my imagination.*

“...? What’s wrong, Atobe? Why do you look so surprised?”

“Oh... N-nothing. I’m glad you’re looking well.”

“Oh yes, I feel wonderful. So light and free.”

Thanks to the dream, I had entirely forgotten about Ceres’s treatment. It was only a little later that I realized I’d used a different name for Atobe that morning.

As to whether I ever switched to calling him Arihito—that’s a story for another day.

AFTERWORD

A much delayed greeting to one and all. My name is Tôwa. Let me first begin by extending my deepest apologies to have kept you waiting for so long.

At first, I had planned to include the decisive battle with the Simian Lord in this volume as well. However, as the page numbers continued to climb with every scene, it became clear our heroes' adventures in District Five would have to continue in the next book, where I also expect to touch on the complicated relationship Elitia has had with the White Night Brigade since the very first volume. Hopefully, I can deliver this next installment much more quickly.

Turning to this seventh volume, we got the first glimpses of how Madoka—who had until now served a secondary, supportive role for the party—may play a part in battles to come. Many readers of the online version wrote in to tell me they felt the pull of a certain tank RPG during the scene at the cart workshop where Arihito and the gang discuss how they would like to modify their vehicle. I deeply empathize with the way such moments can tug at the heartstrings. I myself love writing the sections involving equipment processing and modification, though it does take quite a lot of extra work to keep things consistent.

Speaking of which, if it weren't for all the dedicated proofreaders who check my work, I guarantee there would be many more contradictory details in such areas where they matter most. My editor urged me at the beginning to keep a running database for reference with all the skill and equipment specifics, but I made an excuse about how it was easier for me to search for those points directly in the prose. Now, I've put myself in a position that makes it very easy to mix up the minute details among the vast amount of data contained in this series.

Every time our proofreaders point out specific issues to me, I feel an overwhelming guilt for making all the extra work for them. For example, I often wrote Simian King instead of Simian Lord; the latter is correct, but my final

manuscripts have many mistakes as the autocorrect learned the former. I'm almost certain I got every one correct in this volume, but even rereading these two words makes me want to curl up in the fetal position. All this has taught me to keep names consistent and try to use words that cannot easily be confused. You may say I learned this lesson far too late, and to that, I cannot even groan in protest.

Switching gears, I imagine many readers were curious about the identity of the character on the front cover. The answer: the mysterious young belle, Ivril the Seeker, whom our heroes first meet in District Five. She hasn't had a chance to make an appearance on the battlefield yet, but I hope you remember her along with Huuka Kazabana's incredible illustrations for next time.

This volume's bonus story is told from Kyouka's point of view, though I rarely posted episodes from other party members' perspectives to the web version. Mostly that was because I wanted to tell this story as Arihito sees it. At the same time, I decided the published version would be a great opportunity to include special scenes told from differing vantage points. In the serialized manga adaptation of this series, Rikizo includes a vignette from Suzuna's and Misaki's previous lives. This passage was also based on another bonus side story I wrote based on Suzuna's experience.

The only character from whose perspective I really can't tell any stories is Theresia, as all the dialogue would end up as "....." That said, if you would like to read a story from her point of view, I encourage you to share your opinion in the web version's comment section. We don't keep a running tally, which makes it difficult to keep track of which characters are the most popular, but I do get the sense I see more posts about Theresia than the others. With that in mind, I intend to do all I can to continue the story until—and after!—she returns to her human form. I hope I can count on your support going forward.

Now, I would like to move on to acknowledgments. I long ago passed the territory where any sort of "I'm sorry" directed at my editor would suffice; at this point, I want to offer my deepest apologies for even breathing. I will never be able to thank you enough for sticking with me throughout the process until this volume's completion. However, my editor is also an irreproachably sincere person who I know would remind me I have more important things to expend

my energy on than crafting apologies. So I hereby vow that I will do everything within my capacity to continue this series in a way that will satisfy my readers and nothing else. I look forward to your continued help with this mission.

As for our talented illustrator, Huuka Kazabana, I can only say I grow ever more grateful you have agreed to keep providing these vivid depictions each time I admire them. Many of our readers, I believe, have encountered your work in other contexts, but I imagine they experience new, refreshing aspects of your illustrations with every new piece of art. Your portrait of Ivril on the cover of this volume is nothing short of groundbreaking within the *Rearguard* canon and, in a word, magnificent. I hope you will accept my deepest thanks once again.

For my proofreaders, I have long passed all feelings of apology and have firmly entered crushing guilt territory. I'll bet you may be thinking, "This jerk. All he does is apologize," but truly, without your help, I never would have made it this far into the series. What with every character's unique talents, the fluctuating skill points, and the set language used to display battle moves, this book can feel more like a video game than a novel, and I make no exaggeration when I say none of it would have been possible without you. I will do everything in my power to at the very least reduce even by a fraction the number of contradictions you need to correct in the next volume.

Allow me once more to also extend my thanks to Rikizo for the incredible work on the manga adaptation of this series. Polaris has just made their grand debut in the manga, which also includes unique scenes and absolutely wonderful artwork. If any of my readers have not yet checked it out, I highly recommend and would be exceedingly grateful if you could read the latest chapters available on Bookwalker or Nico Nico Comics.

I would also like to express my gratitude to everyone in the Kadokawa Books editorial department and all those involved in the process of delivering this book into the hands of readers.

Lastly—and above all else—I thank each and every person who has picked up a copy of this book. Thank you so very much.

Fondly, with my heart a few steps further into this thawing spring,

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